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THE ABOLITIONIST

By Leslie Gladson
Author of "Slaver"
and "King's Slaves"



The feared and ruthless slave dealer Captain Jacob King is dead. But his spirit lives on . . .

Silas King, his son, was just twenty when he arrived in Boston. Hating his father's greed for money and lust for women and power, Silas determines to spend his inheritance in support of the abolitionist movement.

Then Silas bought a beautiful mulatto, Belle Merver, and determined to set her free. But when Belle responded with a passion that set all Silas' emotions blazing he realised the awful truth—that he had inherited his father's character and was compelled to follow in his footsteps.



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Leslie Gladson

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TIMES MIRROR

First NEL Edition July 1972
First published in USA by Lancer Books
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FIRST NEL EDITION JULY 1972

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NEL Books are published by

New English Library Limited from Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London, E.C.1.

Made and printed in Great Britain by Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd., Aylesbury, Bucks.

IN PROLOGUE:

'Because of the trade, they had been carried by the million across the Atlantic; their path could be traced by the skeletons which paved the sea; but they had been enriched by the thousands, and these fortunate thousands were the kings, the traders and cabo-sheers, the men in power. Slavery was their economic system and their justice. Their work was performed by slaves; their wealth was estimated in slaves; their gunpowder, rum, and cotton were purchased by slaves. At law, slavery was almost the only punishment for crime. . . .'

Malcolm Cowley

Introduction to **THE ADVENTURES OF
AN AFRICAN SLAVER** - A. & C. Boni
1928

'Crow, you an' me sabby each other long time, and me know you tell me true mouth . . . for all captains come to river tell me King and you big mans stop we trade, and s'pose dat true, what we do? For, you sabby me have too much wife, it be we country fash, and too much child, and some may turn big rogue man . . . We law is s'pose some of we child go bad and we no can sell 'em, we father must kill dem own child. And s'pose trade be done, we must kill too much child same way. But we tink trade no stop, for all we juju-man tell us so, for dem say you country no nibber pass God A'mighty. . . .'

King Holiday, Bonny River Slave Factory
From the **MEMOIRS OF CAPTAIN H. CROW**,
of Liverpool, England, 1830

CHAPTER ONE

They were humorless men, not desperate but grim with the realization of what they did. The interior of the carriage house in which they were hiding was lighted only by the late dusk filtering through the cracks between the vertical boards. They did not know to whom the small shack belonged. They were aware only of the hue and cry on Blue Hill Road, themselves and the frightened mulatto girl drawn well back into her worn cape and farther back into the deep shadows. Her name was Belle Merver and she knew the four white men no better than they knew her.

Nor was she any more sure of them than she had been of the dozen men who had volunteered to tar and feather her following the lynching of her father, hardly an hour past. This, despite the fact that these men, Fred Haversmith, Reverend Amos Stanton, a Negro like herself, Newton Pierce, and the very young man the others called Silas, had risked their lives to save her from the drunken mob of field hands who had suddenly taken a murderous dislike of the Mervers, father and daughter.

'They've gone past,' the man called Silas said from his peek hole at the barred door. 'We are safe, gentlemen.'

'It will be dark in less than an hour,' Newton Pierce observed.

'Did you kill that man, Silas? John Haggarty, it looked like.'

The man called Silas, Silas King de Acquilantos, in fact, moved to a straw pile and carefully wiped clean the wide blade of the Spanish cutlass. He was respectful of the razorlike edge, and particular in the manner of sheathing it in the leather and metal scabbard. It was immediately obvious that the cutlass was an inch or so shorter than the oiled scabbard; the blade was twenty years old and had never known a dull moment for the affection its two owners had lavished upon its edge.

'I think not,' Silas replied to Haversmith's unworried question. 'What, may I ask, was a merchant of Haggarty's stature doing, leading a band of ruffians like that?'

'Perhaps she knows,' Haversmith said, turning toward the cowering figure of the mulatto girl. 'How did that affair begin, miss?'

There was silence and the figure shuffled uncomfortably.

No answer was really needed. In 1844, no good excuse was needed to lynch a male slave and mistreat a female slave, and the Mervers had been slaves. Legally, the girl was still a slave, but at the moment, she was firmly secure in the hands of four of Boston's most adamant anti-slavery men, a happenchance occasion that had saved her golden brown hide, and perhaps her life, and seriously endangered theirs.

Silas stepped forward, squinting to penetrate the darkness with his sharp black eyes. She remained a silent shadow. He understood her silence and her apparent fright. She had seen her father hung to a massive oak, had heard the drunken cries, the bitter curses and violent threats, and had felt the breath of disaster on her cheeks.

'You are safe, miss,' he said in his finely modulated voice. 'We are not men of violence, except in defense of our principles. We are abolitionists.'

'We believe in justice, equality and our country, with God standing solidly on our side and righteousness as our armor. I, like yourself, am a Negro gratefully departed from the servitude of a slave. Do not be afraid. We wish only to help you, miss.'

The Baptist minister stood tall and lean, delineated only by a faint gray highlight on his head, the ethnic brilliance of his large even teeth and the cuffs of his white shirt protruding from his coat sleeves. It had been with some effort that he had kept his normally booming voice soft. Silas neither liked nor disliked the overly pious man. He accepted him because he was a Negro and because he was tireless, fearless and dedicated. The girl did not appear to trust him any more than she did the other three men.

It was Fred Haversmith who fared best. Her father had been hung to his oak tree. He was known throughout the southern fringes of Boston as a rabid abolitionist; it was quite possible that the girl's father had been lynched from his front yard oak for some reason, plus the unreasonable pleasure of angering Fred Haversmith.

'You, and your poor deceased father, were - house-servants for the Abel Arneson's, were you not?' he asked gently.

'Yes sir,' came the deep throated response, faintly.

'What is your name?'

'Belle. Belle Merver, sir. My papa was Ben.'

'We are sorry about your father, Miss Merver,' Haversmith said.

'Ain't no need to be. The ol' fool got what he was a-fixin' for,'

she announced in a steadier tone. 'I got to go back.'

'Never!' boomed Amos Stanton. 'We are godly men and will never relinquish you to those inhuman devils while blood courses in our veins and hope blossoms in our hearts for the salvation of mankind!'

She giggled. 'You a preacher, mister?' she demanded in a different voice, one not trembled with fear nor awe.

'Yes, I am called by the Lord,' he replied.

She giggled again. 'Bigmouth what got my pappy hung up,' she told him. 'Don't pay much hereabouts fo' a nigger to bigmouth.'

'That is a term we do not recognize, Miss Merver,' Silas said after a moment of marked silence.

'Bigmouth?'

'No. We respect the right of all men to be properly identified. Persons of color we call Negroes, or colored, but not niggers.'

Her giggle seemed illogically irrepressible. 'What that supposed to change, sir?'

'How does the street seem now, Silas?' Newton Pierce asked. He was square and middle-aged and seemed continually out of breath. His fortune in harness shops was reputed to be a half million dollars. He was fifty-six and thrice a grandfather, but he thought with a mind as aggressively as did Silas King.

'It has cleared,' Silas decided. 'Another ten or fifteen minutes will bring sufficient darkness. It is only a few squares to Doctor Morse's house. There we can reorganize ourselves.'

'I got to go back,' the mulatto girl repeated. 'I stay out, Mister Arneson whup my yaller hide good!'

'Shush, girl,' the minister rumbled. 'Your destiny is now in God's hands and we are his soldiers!'

She whimpered and Silas turned, abruptly concerned. 'No one will ever whip you again, Miss Merver. Never!'

Eighteen months in Boston had not taught Silas as much about the haphazardly laid-out city as he had thought and they were much farther from Doctor Henry Morse's house than he had guessed. They walked through the night, minding the cobbled streets and deep gutters with all the caution at their command, the four men, great-coated and hatted, the mulatto girl tripping along, timidly in their midst.

Her wool glistened with settling fog, her poor slippers made scuffing sounds on the streets. Whenever they were required to pass a corner gaslight or the yellow squares of a tavern, Silas tried to catch a full look at her face but she seemed aware of his interest

and always managed to be looking the other way. Despite her long cape and insecure underfeet, he determined that she was slim and lithe and only slightly afflicted with the loose-footed shuffle he had long ago learned was almost exclusively the property of a Negro slave. It piqued him also to see how quickly she learned to depend upon the minister's big black hand under her elbow when there was a hazard in the street. His own hand was reserved for the conceivable necessity of presenting the cutlass to any chance challenger. Not until they reached the upward rise of South Beacon Hill did they relax.

'She is reluctant, Silas,' Newton Pierce said in an undertone.

By common consent, they dropped back of the others a step or two so their words became hardly more than an unresolved mumble. 'It is the eternal problem, Newton. I saw it when I was a mere boy but I was fifteen or sixteen before I understood it. The slave has only a heritage of ignorance - and dependance, even though those upon whom they depend are completely undependable in relation to the Negroes' welfare. But with no confidence nor understanding of their own, they would rather depend upon a bad master than have no one. There, past that corner and to the right is Doctor Morse's.'

'What if she insists upon going back to Arneson?'

'Perhaps she should be intensely impressed. Amos seems determined that she not go back.'

'Amos has an eye for fair faces.'

'She is extraordinary?'

Newton nodded directionally. 'Under the light at Henry's you will be surprised,' he replied suggestively. 'She seems concerned by the death of her father.'

It was almost a question but Silas did not try to answer it. In the year since he had become an active member of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, his newly acquired American friends had often posed these half questions, respecting finally the fact that he had been raised among slaves in Cuba, and in fact, still owned in excess of six hundred black men and women, to say nothing of the almost daily increase in numbers due to the constant and encouraged breeding of the captive Africans. It had taken a long time for Silas, the slave holder to convince the grim and unbending New Englanders that his motives were completely separated from the physical conditions into which he had been born.

He didn't answer Newton Pierce because there was not time before they reached the doctor's house to explore the peculiar detachment Negroes had concerning their friends and relatives.

Nor could he expect the grandfather puffing at his side to understand how Belle Merver could speak so lightly and unconcernedly about a father she had probably been extremely fond of when he was alive. As they approached the front of the doctor's huge house, Silas suddenly realized that there was a great deal about Negroes the Society knew nothing about, and that his motivations in joining forces with the abolitionists were nearly alien to those of his associates.

On the broad stoop, Belle Merver hesitated. 'I ain't goin' in there,' she said. 'I got to go back to Quincy Township!'

'You do not understand, my child,' Stanton told her and his big thumb pushed the plunger of the doorbell.

Hardly ten seconds separated his pressure and the clack of a door bolt being shot back. The broad door swung inward and the yellow light from the hall chandelier smashed out onto the five. For a moment Silas stood, stunned by his first full look at the mulatto girl. He blinked. She was by far and away, the most beautiful colored girl he had ever seen. When she pressed back from the door, he saw no expression at all on her not-quite Negro face. He stepped forward and used his right hand to propel her into the mansion hallway.

The Irish maid hastily closed and bolted the door; Doctor Henry Morse was known to hold abolitionist sympathies, but there was no sense in antagonizing the opposition by advertising the fact that four rabid anti-slavery constituents brought mulatto girls to the physician's door at eight o'clock in the evening.

'Doctor Morse is in his study, sirs,' she said. Then with maternal inflection, 'He has had a bloody busy day, too.'

'Thank you, Martha,' Fred Haversmith said, merely unbuttoning his heavy coat. 'We will not keep him long. Come, Miss Merver.'

'You gettin' me in trouble,' she murmured.

'We will only consider what is best for you,' Silas told her, his voice raspy with tension. 'You will like Doctor Morse.'

Henry Morse stood behind his book and paper laden desk, his shirt cuffs turned well back, his collar opened. On the table was a cut glass decanter, half filled with port wine. He did not smile but shook hands with each man, who in turn nodded and stepped back, gradually forming a semicircle around the placidly wary girl.

'Miss Belle Merver,' Fred Haversmith began. 'She has experienced an abominable tragedy this afternoon, and we have rescued her from violent physical harm.'

Morse nodded. 'I have heard a little. One of our friends came by an hour or so ago. He and some others had been looking for you. Your abandoned carriage had been found at Brookline, and it was known that you had escaped the following horseman, with Miss Merver in company. Had I known you were coming, I should have had Martha prepare something for you all. Do have a bit of wine and I shall see what is possible to concoct.'

Shortly, there was potato bread and cheese and tea, laced with brandy. Few questions were asked by the doctor because among these men, questions were pointless. Bluntly, Haversmith recounted the brutal afternoon; the four men had gathered at his house to discuss the support they could give to John Quincy Adams' latest attack on the gag rule, Number 21. They had been in earnest discussion when a din had penetrated the closed study in Haversmith's big house and by the time they had responded, Ben Merver was hanging, dead and mutilated from the oak tree in the terraced gardens in front of the Haversmith mansion.

'I availed myself of a bird gun and Silas brandished his frightful cutlass, and we managed to frighten the ruffians and murderers into releasing Miss Merver. There was little time and we all knew that facing opposition, the drunken killers would return with firearms. We packed into Newton's carriage and escaped, barely leading a formidable band of horsemen, all armed, to Blue Hill Road. At Brookline Township, it became evident that we could not outrun the group in the carriage, so we abandoned it and struck out toward Boston on foot. We managed to find a shed in which we hid for an hour or so before coming to you, Henry.'

The doctor frowned, then scanned the men and Belle Merver with stern eyes. 'A bad occasion, I am afraid, Fred. Your house was nearly burned to the ground - your family is safe, thank God! It is believed that the entire affair was planned, knowing you gentlemen were in anti-slavery conference. The house was personally fired by John Marsh Haggarty, who had lost his left hand to Silas' cutlass. It is known that the four of you spirited away a female slave belonging to Abel Arneson, a rather difficult man and one in great sympathy with the Southerners. His barley market lies largely in Maryland.' He tapped the papers beside the opened books, books Silas now saw were volumes of legal reference. 'I am nearly through with a defense for your action in rescuing Miss Merver, and it will go to Lewis Tappan this night, for presentation at the mayor's office in the morning. A most unfortunate occasion, as I have said. Have you thought of a physically defensive action

until we can arrange a satisfactory legal rebuttal for the concerted attacks that will be levied against the four of you?"

Silas looked at Belle. Not one word had been said concerning her safety, nor what was to become of her when the heat of pursuit had cooled. She sat, her huge black eyes moving from speaker to speaker, obviously not understanding anything but the shape of danger they described. It was disturbing, but Silas could not say why he felt more acutely about her future than about his own. As a 'runaway slave' she was subject to a beating and whatever penalties Abel Arneson chose to administer; as a white man, an abolitionist, who had physically assisted a slave to 'escape' her owner, he was subject to a dozen of Massachusetts' laws, from a charge of conspiracy to one of any nature the pro-slavery courts could concoct.

'This may be more serious than we imagined,' Pierce muttered.

'God will protect us. His ways are mysterious but unfailing!'

Belle looked first, and Silas followed her questioning gaze to the piously placid Baptist minister. He seemed mesmerized by his own righteousness, and by the boom of his own words. The five men sat, discussing probabilities, and in the end, their only stop-gap was a decision to go into separated hiding. In a city of nearly one hundred thousand people, of many theologies and beliefs and political convictions, they had friends, known and unknown. All except Reverend Amos Stanton had sufficient wealth to manage the details; being black, he needed only to change out of his clerical garb and don the clothes of a working freedman to find refuge among members of his congregation.

'This will be best,' Doctor Morse agreed. 'I am sure that within a week at the most, our legal friends will find a way to dull the sword of avariciousness. But there must be no delay. Warrants for your detention are feasibly in circulation at this moment, and if not, certainly before tomorrow noon! You do not even dare return to your homes for preparation. I will see that your friends advise your households and see to the management of your properties. Oh, I suggest you leave by the east gate. My house may be under surveillance. If so, they have seen you enter and will no doubt attempt to capture you as you leave.'

'A damnable development!' Haversmith growled. 'And my family without a roof over their heads!'

'We should leave here, one at a time,' Pierce observed.

'We need pistols, Henry,' Haversmith said.

'I think not. A charge of murder added to whatever is now pending will cure nothing,' the doctor opined. 'But I should think you had best not delay in establishing yourself safely, my friends.'

Reverend Amos Stanton jumped nervously to his feet and began arranging his coat.

'What,' Silas said with great deliberation, ' - about Miss Merver?'

The others turned, mouths noticeably slack at mention of the mulatto. Obviously she was suddenly a fresh hazard. She squirmed visibly. 'Like I done said, I got to go home, misters!'

'A terrible sacrifice, but perhaps it would alleviate matters,' Stanton said, his voice having lost its big-bell power. 'A terrible sacrifice, but God will understand, I'm sure.'

Silas ignored the ashen faced minister and looked specifically at each of the other men. Worry, concern, but a vestige of fear tinged each expression. He smiled, suddenly aware of the peculiar, muchly hated surge of excitement that went through him at moments of rash inspiration. As if his father, the hated Jacob King, slaver, murderer, and crusher of men had not been dead for eight years, he heard the quarterdeck roar. Then he looked down at the scabbard hanging heavily at his left hip, precisely as Jerome had worn it during the ten years he had helped Jacob King be the scourge of the Middle passage.

'Do not fret, gentlemen,' Silas said with his thin-lipped Spanish smile to soften his contempt. 'I shall see to Miss Merver's welfare. We have not taken her to lose her to the fears of mice!'

Belle giggled. It broke the tension, and one by one, the three men left. As Silas stood up, Belle followed suit, and Doctor Morse followed them through the house, his surgeon's hand clamped expressively on Silas' shoulder. At the door to the east gate, he held Silas back.

'Be cautious, my friend. Among other informations gained this day, there is one suggesting your charge may not be - medically sound.'

'Meaning?'

'A female slave of her striking appearance can hardly become nineteen or twenty without positive notice by her masters!'

Another thought occurred when Silas discovered that Belle was waiting at the gate with the slightest vestige of impatience in her stance. Within his belly, a half-formed need became full-grown.

CHAPTER TWO

Few things excited Don Alvarez del Prado. The last twenty of his sixty years had been borrowed, by the grace of a God he did not care about and with the auspices of a Devil he did not fear. He was excited now; there could be no reason for Girado Jesus Espinoza D., Boston representative for the Banco de Madrid to send him a securely sealed letter unless it concerned Silas, and good or bad, word of his dead partner's son was enough to make Alvarez' heart pump furiously.

Even if it were nothing more than a protest about the amounts of Spanish gold Silas was spending, it would be pleasant, but the contents seemed thicker than a statement of accounts. He fumbled at the wax seal and tore at the pasted flap of the envelope. It had been nineteen days from Boston to Havana and showed some stain of dampness.

There was no statement of accounting. The warning bells that had kept Alvarez alive while other men fell, sounded in his finely formed head and the tight wrinkles at the corners of his snake brilliant eyes drew his face into sharpness. He held the three folded sheets of completely covered paper and made no attempt to read until he had conquered his excitement and prepared himself for unpleasantness. He had great capacity for withstanding shock. As the mind and master of King-Alvarez Company, he never fully relaxed the mantle of steel he wore around his personal self. He began to read.

He believed what Espinoza had written because the Spanish banker had been honest and reliable for a dozen years and because Alvarez was supremely aware of the many facets forming the exterior nature of Silas King. In a place or two he thought Espinoza seemed a bit hysterical, but then, it had been many years since he had departed the calmer, more liberal attitudes of Madrid, and from the day of Silas' birth he had shown a marked capability for startling people. Alvarez reread a segment or two of the long letter, then laid it quietly on his desk, lips pursed for the very few seconds it took him to make the decision. Then he turned to speak to his clerk who sat with a cramped look of expectancy on his plump face.

'Pedrigo, you will dispatch a messenger to the *Grenita*,' he said

in flawless Spanish. 'Captain Nello will prepare the brig for sea by tomorrow morning. We will clear for Boston, with an expectancy of forty-five days at least. Señora King's quarters are to be in perfect order, and I shall anticipate no disorder whatever. Do you understand?'

'Si, Señor Gerente! Boston! Is the boy in trouble, señor?'

Alvarez' eyes narrowed even more and he tapped the desk top significantly. 'Señor Silas King is never in trouble, Pedrigo. King-Alvarez takes excellent care of its own. Go.'

The decision had been simple to make; the incredible list of items to be attended in the limited time Alvarez had allowed himself was another matter. He had many people he could trust to see to the business of King-Alvarez because the business provided a living for a formidable army of persons. By nightfall he had held brief but definite conferences with a dozen men, bankers, lawyers, warehouse owners, slave brokers and buyers of coffee, cane and bananas. All were horrified at the thought of Don Alvarez del Prado being away from Havana for so many days but he referred one to another and built a quick but tightly tied knot of competent merchants. He thought of a hundred matters that would come up while he was away, but he had great confidence in the men whom he had trained in the course of making King-Alvarez Company one of the largest and most successful in Havana.

It was well after seven that night before he permitted his mind to abandon the commercial and turn to the contemplation of what might lie ahead. His first personal question was why he had made the decision to visit Silas in Boston, knowing well that the lad had developed an amazing, if unorthodox, ability to take care of himself. It came to Alvarez, who was always truthful to himself, if not to other people, that he was plainly weary of placidity, of accounts and contracts and counting money. Further, he was tired of continually burying memories of less sterile days. He did not want to become an old man, no matter how rich and influential. Since the day Jerome had split Jacob King from throat to brisket, there had been little flavor to Alvarez' life.

He had long known of Silas' abolitionist tendencies, of his innate gentleness and his faithlessness to the concepts of King-Alvarez but he had subconsciously clung to the hope that in the end, the rapacious greed of Silas' Spanish mother would awaken in the youth and wed itself to the heritage of his irrepressible father, Jacob. This dream, despite the personal satisfaction that he had helped Silas become the gentleman his father had never

been and the credit to the Acquilantos his mother had worked so hard to evade being. Instinctively Alvarez felt that if there was yet a spark of King-Alvarez to be fanned into raging flame, it lay in the breast of Silas, and Silas was in Boston, in some trouble, and like his father, incapable of asking for help.

The carriage ride out the Matanzas road to the Hacienda del King was too familiar to be pleasant and Alvarez stared unseeingly at the broad back of the liveried driver. When they came to the beginning of the King property, noted by the high, tile capped wall that separated the richly cultivated plantation from the unruly Cuban jungle to the north, Alvarez felt the loneliness again. It had come like an agonized heartbeat throughout the past eight years; he leaned forward and tapped the driver's back. The huge Negro slave merely nodded and grunted, 'Ho!' to the fine Spanish horses, and the carriage spurred on, past the hacienda gates and up the steepening slope.

Here was the part that always hurt the most, yet brought to Alvarez the deepest pleasure. Without looking, he could remember Jacob King, struggling to mount the hill to the knoll upon which he had set his granite heart. Limping, gasping, fighting the pain of his mutilated ribcage, he had tried the hill daily, with the giant mulatto, Jerome, following, his one arm constantly ready to support his master if a rut or a stone betrayed his uncertain step, or to drag from its oiled scabbard the Spanish cutlass that had helped Jacob become and remain, the scourge of the Windward Coast of Africa. There were thousands of other memories but Alvarez saved them until the driver halted the carriage and the footman on the rear perch came around to open the door. Alvarez ignored the feeling of age this servitude always brought. He left the lacquered, hand-crafted brougham and took the narrow path to the tomb, worn by his feet alone. No one else in all of Cuba cared where Jacob King was buried. To his knowledge, Silas had never visited the grave of his father, and Elena had been there hardly more than once or twice.

No vegetation had grown around the mortared stone cubicle, nor had any ventured to sprout around the lesser crypt where Jerome was buried. As if by habit, Alvarez moved forward and took a familiar seat on the foot of the larger crypt. He blinked because this bit of unreasonable sentimentality invariably cracked his hardness.

'*Mi amigo*,' he said in barely more than a whisper.

No answer came, but Alvarez smiled gently as he imagined how Jacob might reply, cursing him for a Spanish thief and accusing

him of unbridled connivery. His right hand twitched, remembering the unrestrained power of his dead partner's handshake. Then in English because Jacob had steadfastly refused to learn either Spanish or Portuguese, the languages of their endeavor, he said:

'Silas needs you, Jacob, as I always knew he someday would, and more hopefully, that he would know the shape of his need. May the Sweet Virgin forgive me for presuming to send him a tired old Spanish thief in place of you, *mi amigo*, but now there is only me, *es verdad*? In any case, my friendship for you and the certainty of our years together make me believe it is better that you do not answer this, his first need. You were never a man of philosophical gift, Jacob, and no matter that you were a Yankee, born and bred, those of Boston would strain your patience. I can not promise that I will bring him home, *mi amigo*, but if God is good, I shall see him through whatever is obtuse enough to threaten King-Alvarez. From the pit of Hell where I am bound to know you sit, with Jerome at your side, do not laugh at my endeavor, Jacob, and see the *Grenita* through fair passage.'

Abruptly, Alvarez laughed at himself. 'You maudlin old fool' he said aloud, and went back to the carriage. '*La hacienda*, Gregorio.'

'Yassuh, Señor. How is he today?'

Señora Elena Maria Sandini King let the three closely written pages settle into her lap. She did not look up because in the eight years she had been Jacob King's widow and Silas King's step-mother as well as one of Cuba's richest women, she had learned not to face Don Alvarez del Prado until she was very sure of how she felt and what she wanted to say. Finally she sighed, raising her maturely magnificent breasts a third out of the expensive lace bodice. The flesh was not as creamy as it had been, because at thirty-five, some hateful chemistry within her lush body had permitted her octaroon blood to pre-empt the tawny beauty that had kept her Negro blood a deeply hidden secret.

For over a year, she had not left the secluded walls of the hacienda, lest the darkening areas between her breasts and under her ears and between her long, smoothly tapered fingers betray the massive, unforgivable flaw in the King family's escutcheon. With Alvarez she felt safe because he had known of her black fragment from the beginning; she hated him for his tolerance and she feared him for his wisdom. Finally, she looked up to his acquiline face.

'Is this unexpected, Alvarez?'

'No. But your stepson is only twenty, señora. Despite his father's American blood, he was bred a Spaniard – a Spaniard now, with unspanish sympathies in a land already famous for its unforgiving, and caught up in a foc'sle brawl about the worth of a slave. Further, he is a Spanish citizen, rich, alien and adventurous. He has obviously taken it upon himself to extend his activities in a direction contrary to American law and has subsequently gone into hiding. With, so Espinoza says, a mulatto wench of questionable character.'

'I – I am a mulatto wench, Don Alvarez!' Elena reminded him.

'I know well what you are, señora. I have also had nearly a decade to evaluate your character. It has improved some over the years. I might also remind you that the King you married was of vastly different stamina than Silas. Of prime importance is that Silas is the son of the only man I ever really loved. He needs the direction of a man of wisdom, an old warrior, if you will, but yet a man to be reckoned with. We leave for Boston on the morning tide.'

'B-Boston!' Elena gasped and a curl of fear wrapped itself around her innards. She was ill-prepared to face the world, and particularly, an alien world. She hated the sea because it had been her brutal husband's realm, and she hated the *Grenita* because it was named for Jacob King's second wife, a woman of white skin, refinement and a graciousness Don Alvarez refused to omit in recounting earlier, happier days. After a moment, her fears crystalized to the certainty that she dared not face Silas, who had grown to be a handsome young man, no doubt still remembering the lapses in her 'character' that Alvarez had only hinted at. 'I can not go,' she husked. 'My health, the long voyage – I could be of no use, Alvarez! You must not ask –'

'I wasn't aware that I had asked, señora. We will depart the hacienda at an hour before dawn. The *Grenita* will be the first ship past the guns of Morro after the military flag of permission has been raised. Come, come, Elena! This will be the first chance you've had to be a proper stepmother in five years! And Jacob would have appreciated it!'

'Curse Jacob!' she exclaimed.

He frowned and left her alone in the massive *sala*, snatching the letter from her lap as he passed. He knew, as did she, that no matter her distaste for the voyage, she would be ready in the last dark of night, her luggage packed by her several handservants, her handsome face and figure in perfect taste for a far more exciting adventure than an eighteen or twenty day passage up the

Atlantic Coast. No punishment would attend her failure to be ready; she had never been a slave nor even a recognized Negro. In eight years, she had established herself honorably and convincingly as the elegantly and decorously refined widow of Captain Jacob King. She contributed to the church and sundry establishments once ruled by her priest father, and she in no way offended the social structures of Havana.

But at thirty-six, Elena was a slave as surely as if she wore the shackles her great-great grandmother had worn into the barracons of Santiago. She was a slave first to her knowledge that she possessed Negro blood, a mortal sin in nineteenth century Cuba. She was a slave to deeply hidden desires she believed only a woman of African heritage should feel. Her slavery included the awareness that her husband had tolerated her only because she was of black blood, and he had been known far and wide as a nigger lover, in the physical sense. And her greatest conviction that she was a slave was her constant inability to stand firmly before the power and criticism of Don Alvarez del Prado.

She began to weep softly, her tendency toward savage mysticism overwhelming her Catholic upbringing, until the frightening imaginings chilled her flesh and scattered her normally good senses.

Finally, desperation raised her from the huge leather chair and she went up the winding, crystal lighted stairs to her apartment on the second floor of the coldly rambling hacienda. She instructed her maids, then took a strong draught of Madeira wine and allowed herself to be put to bed.

As usually happened to her during moments of strong emotion, she felt the burning, clutching need of a man, but this transgression she never permitted herself when Don Alvarez del Prado was spending the night at the hacienda instead of at the Havana townhouse. Her single satisfaction was that the next two months were Cuba's hottest, and she had begun to detect a small odor of nigger in her perspiration during the past year or two.

The night of activity aboard the *Grenita*, tied to one of the King-Alvarez docks in the harbor of Havana, was largely symbolic. Not once during the ten years the sleek brig had been under the command of Captain Emanuel Nello had the vessel been anything but seaworthy in the full tradition of its Baltimore origin.

She had been built to serve as a slaver by a Yankee anti-slavery sympathist who had lost the idealistic battle of his conscience to the need to express his talent for speed and seaworthiness. Her fine lines and shallow bilges were never suitable for bulk cargo;

she had never transported a slave as such because in 1830, Don Alvarez del Prado had refitted her for the private uses of King-Alvarez. Her sheer deck had been opened to accommodate hatches and a low deckhouse. The rough rails and unfinished timbers, suited to the short life and utilitarian needs of a slaver, had been replaced by teak and ebony, fastened by brilliant brass no slave ship would risk sparkling in the Middle Passage sun. Further, she had been painted white, partly in yachting tradition, partly to make her instantly recognizable as a non-slaver, despite her raked masts and distinctive profile.

Now forty-seven, Captain Nello had resolved himself to the life of a yacht captain, this resolve shaped by a naturally lethargic Spanish enthusiasm, a substantial salary, and a seaman's love of his command. This night he directed the final furbishment of his brig with a snap and hardness his thirty-two man crew found slightly out of keeping with the normal ease of their berths. Not that Captain Nello had ever been soft nor lax, but the crew had become used to furled sails, easy watches and much leave time among the brothels and cantinas of Havana. Nello, clad in tropical whites, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, seemed everywhere at once, directing the stowing of provender as it arrived on the dock in noisy wagons, harassing the deckhands who coiled line and checking the rigging for frayed lashings. It was obvious to all that the pending passage to Boston pleased their captain. To most, this was understandable; to a captain with a fine brig, a good crew and an interesting destination, sailing orders were like the flavor of country wine.

Shortly after the four A.M. change of watch, the *Grenita* was as nearly perfect as she had ever been and Master Nello retired to his cabin, as weary as any one of his crew. In his mouth was the taste of country wine, but with time to lie in his berth and think, several other exquisite flavors tickled his palate.

He had not seen the boy in over three years, in fact, since he had transported the then spindly youth to Malaga, the first leg of his long journey to Madrid and the University. One of Emanuel's private laments was that in the beginning years of his friendship with Silas he had been unable to interest the lad in the sea. The boy's consummate hatred for his father and all he stood for had somehow rendered him incapable of loving the sea and fine ships. None the less, they had been friends, and by quick addition, Nello was surprised that the thin boy, with bright Spanish eyes and a quick tongue was now almost twenty-one. He chuckled, shaking his muscular frame. They had made jokes about the fact that

because Alvarez del Prado had originally registered the brig to Silas King de Acquilantos, the *Grenita* actually belonged to Silas, and they had debated long and laughingly about raising the salary of her captain. At last memory, the figure had risen to five thousand Spanish doubloons a month, which Nello had scoffed at as wages for a scow-master.

He spent several minutes relishing the thought of a return to Boston harbor, a port he had often visited with pleasant memories in the years before King-Alvarez had sought him for command of the *Grenita*.

He gave short shrift to these rememberings because he wanted to think about once again having the beautiful and nearly barbaric Señora Elena Maria aboard his brig; and for a minimum of forty days, a period too extended for the sharp eyes of Alvarez del Prado to fully supervise. He wondered if she could have possibly forgotten how to drop through the hatch into his up-raised hands without gasping aloud at the grip of his eager fingers. A wild one, nearly as passionate as the dusky women of his native Cadiz. Captain Nello abruptly did not feel his nearly fifty years at all.

CHAPTER THREE

The first ten or twelve days of hiding in Squire Fendler's garden cottage had been the most exciting time of Silas' life. Locked into three small rooms with Belle, constantly on the alert for someone, officially or unofficially, to try the serving of any one of the seven criminal warrants sworn out for his arrest by the Boston courts, stropping the cutlass and planning escape routes if their hiding place were discovered, Silas came alive with new vigor. Most of this was Belle's doing, a fact he did not try to evade.

From the beginning, she vaguely reminded him of somebody, but after a day or so, he was certain that he had never known another woman like her, and he was positive that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

It had taken her exactly one day to cease calling him 'sir' and another day to drop the 'Mist' from 'Mist' Silas, and in that trio of days, she had become Belle, without the 'Miss'. She cooked

and minded the cottage and stayed out of his reach, a condition for which he was thankful, even if it left him spasmodically miserable.

Friends surreptitiously brought him clothes; Belle had only one dress, the gray, seam worn garment she had been wearing the first time he'd seen her. They made great fun out of the ill-fitting but devastatingly unconfining wrap she made of a cotton bed cover while she washed and dried the calico dress. He did not need to put a hand to her. Within a week, she was constantly naked in his mind, bending, twisting, lifting or placing. What he did not know about her gold brown body he invented.

Not once, however, could Silas violate the trust in which he held himself. They were together in the cottage because of some badly defined desperation. She was a runaway slave, no longer reluctant, and he was a conspirator, and he worked very hard to explain how he felt about their peculiar circumstances, particularly following one of the unscheduled visits by a friend or friends who by then, had found out about Squire Fendler's garden cottage guests.

'That was Arthur Tappan, Belle,' he said after a long, not pleasant visit by the wealthy cloth merchant. 'He is in favor of taking you to another place in Cambridge. He has rich friends there who could provide a more suitable hiding place for you.'

He sat in a slump, weighted by the invincible logic of Tappan. It was neither healthy nor entirely moral, Tappan had said, for Silas and Belle to remain under the same roof, devoid of a third party to insure the circumspect nature of their predicament. There was talk among the various anti-slavery groups, due largely to the very puritanical nature of their abolitionist convictions.

'He think you sleepin' wif me, don't he?' Belle half-asked.

Silas nodded, stealing a quick glance at the face he had grown used to seeing in a general state of no expression, except laughter.

'He sho'nough wrong!' she snapped, then let her laughter gush. 'I'm about the no-slept-withest female he ever saw! You goin' to send me packin', Silas?'

The raw manner of her query choked off his voice so he only shook his head, strongly. To supplement his determination, he impulsively extended a hand and patted her muscular thigh, tightly cased in the worn gray dress. The warmth and softness and reality of her caused him to jerk his hand back as if burned. She almost giggled.

'I am not without feeling, Belle, believe me. In the past few days, I have thought a great deal about everything - us, the charges

against me, the seriousness of your personal situation. You no longer want to go back to Arneson, do you? Has what I have said about slavery and the people who support it convinced you that there is a better life, a just life for you if only you express a little determination to be free? We can not do it alone. Without the support of the slaves, themselves, our best efforts will produce only chaos and failure. You don't want go to back, do you, Belle?"

He didn't notice the slight narrowing of her eyes as she looked at his worried face. For a moment, he was confused and disappointed. He had asked her a question which he felt could be answered without more than a second's thought, and when no reply came, he felt inwardly sick. Then her left hand, slim, wriggly and positive came to his right and her fingers squeezed, reassuringly if not possessively.

"No, Silas," she murmured. "I stay wif you."

But even then, he could not muster the courage to take her in his arms. Nor did he in the several days to come, despite the fact that a few pressures relaxed and few more developed.

The measure of his friends was established by the diligence with which they pursued the quashing of the warrants against not only Silas but his three friends. All but one charge, that of mayhem arising from the summary manner in which Silas had relieved John Marsh Haggarty of his left hand. There was, however, some hope that the mayhem charge could be resolved by resurrecting a nearly forgotten clause of the anti-dueling laws, passed by the State of Massachusetts legislature. To this end, Silas provided a sight draft on the Bank of Madrid, a procedure the New England Anti-Slavery Society was pleasantly familiar with.

"Whoovie, all that money!" Belle marveled. "You rich, Silas?"

"Very," was his only reply.

"That nice," she informed him.

So in a mood of shame and undeserved pride, he confessed the origin of his fortune and the kind of heritage he had been forced to endure. He further recited the history of the cutlass and the mulatto who had killed his father with it and died a freedman at the end of a rope instead of upon the whipping rack at *Misericordi*, Havana's most notorious slave pit.

"Don't matter he was free," Belle decided. "Got himself dead anyway, didn't he?"

"He's buried beside my father at the hacienda," Silas informed her. "All men deserve to die, as well as live, in dignity. Don Alvarez buried him at my father's right hand, believing that Jerome's

loyalty was more important than his moment of rage.'

'You didn't like your pappy, did you, Silas?'

It was not a fair question, he thought, because no one who had not known the despicable Jacob King could believe the magnitude of his evil. For a moment, he realized that if he confessed his hate for his father, he could not but suffer in the mind and eyes of Belle Merver.

'I perhaps never understood him very well,' he compromised.

'My pappy made me rich, I'd stand up for him,' she said. 'Anyway, he sound to me like he was some rompin' buck!'

It was nearly an endless conversation because each slight rebuttal she made to his recital only called for further explanation. Instead of being irritated by her seemingly simple attitudes, he determined to try all the harder to rid her mind of primitive considerations and instill within her a positive appreciation for what he was sure could only be classed as civilized, freedom sponsored logic.

They had been in the cottage fifteen days when Silas awakened one morning in a state of complete misery, surrounded by confusion. The Society's lawyers had indeed invoked the 'heat of anger' clause and a date had been set for a judicial hearing on the validity of the mayhem charge. Indenture had been secured by another draft on the Bank of Madrid. Unhappily, Silas was free to depart the cottage, and Belle and the not unvocal disapproval of his abolitionist friends.

'You must go back to your own house, Silas,' Doctor Morse insisted. 'Now, with no excuse for abode here, with Belle Merver, you may well do yourself and our cause more damage than you had previously done it good. I beg of you! There will be no problem. They are searching no more fiercely for her than for any other runaway slave and she is safe with Squire Fendler, our very good friend. You have often cursed your heritage to me, my friend, but methinks the fortune you despise for its origin stands you now in excellent stead.'

And that quickly, Silas knew what he was going to do.

For the first time in over two weeks, he left Belle, but before Squire Fendler's carriage had returned him to his own house on Acorn Street, Silas was sure he could never be happy away from her. He spent no time trying to understand how he felt or why; he was primarily concerned with the physical problem of keeping her at his side and he courted rather a ruthless disregard of any suspected interference. Mentally he toyed with plans, to dress her

beautifully and establish her as a lady. He even thought of hiring a tutor and mentor, to aid her through the difficult time required to accustom her to being something more than a house slave for a barley merchant. Idly, and with no tangible evidence to support his concepts, he thought of Belle as a powerful influence in his future assaults upon the citadel of slavery. Together, they would work shoulder to shoulder, winning campaign after campaign against the forces of pro-slavery villains. And underneath all of these lofty dreams there burned a fiercely different kind of fire, one he hesitated to acknowledge until he could approach Belle on what he believed to be an equal footing.

He spent a boring hour listening to the reports and accounting of his small staff of household domestics. His housekeeper, a garrulous Scandinavian woman of great girth and positive opinions, berated in systematic order the tradesmen, the servicemen and the mass of curiosity inspired Bostonians who had plagued her during her master's absence. The two maids protested about each other and the groundskeeper complained about the unseasonable amount of weeds that had invaded the terraces on the breath of the summer rains. Done with unpleasant details, he retired to his room and proceeded to dress himself in his most impressive Edwardian suit of fine Australian wool. He ignored the frowns of his domestics as he left the house, headed for the public carriage stand at the foot of Acorn Street. The tightness of his nerves was not visible.

He had come to a monstrous decision, monstrous in his mind because to carry it out, Silas intended to violate a conviction or two he had long believed inviolable. He intended to buy Belle Merver from her Quincy owner, at any price under any circumstances. At a price he hoped, that would be exorbitant enough to be called ransom, which label he personally placed upon the mulatto's purchase. Short of spiriting her to some distant land, he knew of no other way to release her from the onus of a runaway slave. Under the laws of Massachusetts, she was doomed to spend the rest of her life in hiding or return to the clutches of her legal owner to suffer whatever indignity he choose to administer. Silas had no intention of permitting her to endure either fate. To free her, he proposed to deal with a Boston slave broker, utilizing the weapons of his enemies and secure for Belle the right to walk as a free woman for the remainder of her life.

To this end, he knocked firmly at the door of one Armand Heber and entered the small mean office when a gruff, unschooled voice bid him enter. Behind a desk littered with businesslike looking

papers sat Heber, his blocky body filling the castered chair with ugly lumps and bulges. His face was florid, his gray hair was sparse. He ventured a fatuous smile, which froze on his face as he apparently recognized Silas King de Acquilantos, the abolitionist.

'Well, now,' he muttered. 'Who have we here?'

'I think you know very well who I am, sir.'

'Mister King, the bible-pounding nigger lover,' Heber said, ending his accusation with a harsh laugh. 'You come in peace, I presume?' he asked, sliding open a drawer significantly close to his right hand.

'I do, scoundrel,' Silas replied.

'Ah yes, then you will honor my poor facilities by seating yourself. You obviously have evaded the law and proper retribution for your attack upon my friend and associate, Mister Haggarty.'

'It is not a matter I care to discuss with you, Mr. Heber.'

'But in truth, you have come to discuss something with me, have you not?'

Instinctively, Silas developed the urge to turn and leave the place, to find some other way to save Belle, to not reduce his own stature to the level of dealing with a man of Heber's calibre. But the decision had been made and he sat down, holding his hat and gloves on his knees with a positive gesture of distaste for the width of the scarred bench upon which he sat.

'I wish to buy a slave,' he said. 'Not in the spirit of your normal customers, but to work an act of proper intention.'

'What's her name, this slave you want to buy?'

Rage flared in Silas; the cold presumption by Heber that the human being in question was a woman somehow added insult to the entire affair. 'You make an assumption beyond your authority, sir!'

Heber laughed and pivoted in his chair. On a table behind him was a stack of flimsies, thirty or forty sheets of crudely printed foolscap. He thumbed down a few sheets, then jerked one free of the pile, turned back and fluttered the brashly printed paper to Silas.

'Is that the wench?' he asked.

Silas only glanced, observing at once that it was a standard 'wanted' sheet for a runaway slave. It gave her name, Belle Merver, her age, nineteen, and a reasonably comprehensive description of her. Reward for her return to her 'due and rightful owner', Abel Arneson of Quincy Township was one hundred dollars, payable upon delivery of the 'rapscallion wench'.

'That one, Mister King?' Heber repeated.

'Of course you knew that she had escaped her evil master with myself and friends,' Silas remarked with some scorn.

'Mister King, I know a great deal about that nigger. I sold her no-good daddy half a dozen times in fifteen years. That old son-of-a-bitch was lucky to have lasted as long as he did. Skinning and de-balling was what he deserved, that one! You ever see him?'

'No.'

'He was blacker'n coal, was Ben. How you think your wench come up with all that high-brown hide? I'll tell you, King. Old Ben knocked up an immigrant girl, nearly twenty years ago. She was cook for a family down Pennsylvania way. Family threw her out and Ben wound up with the brownskin kid. That's your Belle. You really want to buy her?'

'I said so, didn't I?'

Heber snorted. 'Right expensive, I'd guess.'

'Expense is no concern of yours.'

Heber leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing as he studied his young client. Silas withstood the inspection without allowing either his anger or his discomfort to show.

'You have her now, don't you, Mister King?' Heber finally asked.

'That is hardly your concern, I think.'

'I think it is. First off, she's runaway. Second thing, she's run off with a New England Anti-slavery Society lad. Third off, I can get into some important trouble even talking to you, and ain't no telling what might happen if certain people knew I was helping Silas King buy a nigger slave. Particularly, that nigger woman!'

'Your language and mannerisms are distasteful to me, Heber!'

'Is that so?' the broker drawled, dropping his pistol hand to the open drawer. 'Haul out that infernal cutlass and cut off my hand, then. Go ahead. Give me an excuse to kill you, King, and come flapping back on your goddamned angel's wings and count the medals the good people of Boston will give me! Now, now. We have business to transact! I suggest a truce. A smile, too. May I pour you some of my best wine?'

'How much will you need to negotiate Miss Merver's purchase?'

'Miss Merver, indeed!' Heber chuckled. 'Two thousand dollars and fifteen percent for my services.'

Silas opened his mouth to protest the price, then clamped his jaw, realizing that he was at the complete mercy of the broker. He nodded and drew from his inner coat pocket an impressive wallet. Heber waved a negative hand. 'That was a guess and may-

be a wrong one, Mister King. Old man Arneson may think as much of her black ass as you seem to. I trust you – I'll bring you the bill of sale when the deal is done. I know my business – and from what I hear, you know a thing or two about dealing in niggers yourself. Hell, I heard about King-Alvarez fifteen years ago on the Guinea coast!"

"How quickly can you accomplish your nefarious work?"

"Three, four days, iff'n Arneson ain't off on a crop selling spree. Day or two ain't going to change the price any and you got her bedded down, all safe and sound. Tell you, Mister King. I know of a hand count of likely nigger girls you could buy for what old Arneson is going to want for your 'Miss Merver'. Wager none of 'em as worn 'round the edges as she is, neither!"

"What are you trying to say, Heber?"

The broker chuckled lasciviously. "Told you I knew a lot about that nigger wench. Hey. You ever know a good looking yaller girl get to be nineteen, near twenty, without spending most of it on her black ass?"

"I ought to kill you, fiend!"

"It ain't easy," Heber remarked. "How about that wine?"

Silas stood up, clapped his beaver on with firmness and moved to the door. As he reached for the well worn thumb-latch, Heber's chuckle came again. "Three days, not over four, Mister Abolitionist!"

Only one thought filled Silas' mind; he would pay the man and obtain the bill of sale, then kill him. Halfway to Squire Fendler's house and the garden cottage, the considerable practice he had undergone to resolve viciousness and evil with patience and consistent goodness faded the thought of murder from his mind. The evaporation left room to consider what the slave broker had hinted about Belle Merver. He felt instinctively that it could not be true of one so sweet and gentle, yet he could not escape the logic of what Heber had said about the kind of life handsome female slaves were nearly always forced to live. Nor could he evade the occasional flashes of near-memory, in which a woman not unlike Belle seemed passionately frantic in the arms of a huge black man, slobbering, sweating and uttering barbaric urgings.

When the carriage turned into the Fendler roadway, Silas was damp with perspiration and his chest ached with tightness. He leaped from the carriage while it was still rolling, and he did not realize how foolish he must seem until he saw Belle's smiling face peering through the parted curtains of the garden cottage.

Abruptly, everything was all right again.

CHAPTER FOUR

He knew they were his friends but they stood now, five dark-browed men with shoulders hunched, their hands clasped at their backs, not glowering but somehow filling the front room of the Acorn Street house with a tangible belligerency. Silas leaned over the freshly printed flimsy on his desk, staring with disbelief at disaster.

They had taken the original poster declaring Belle a runaway slave and printed it high on the foolscap, leaving room for a second message below the hideously black type. A large 'CANCELLED' was printed slopingly across the wanted text. The second message explained why:

THE ABOVE MENTIONED FEMALE SLAVE IS NO LONGER SOUGHT BY THE LAW AS A RUNAWAY WENCH. SHE HAS BEEN LEGALLY PURCHASED AS A PERSONAL HOUSE SERVANT BY SILAS KING DEACQUILANTOS, THE NOTORIOUS ABOLITIONIST AND NIGGER LOVER WHOSE ANTI-SLAVERY POLITICS ARE WELL KNOWN AND WHOSE PERSONAL PREFERENCES IN WOMEN ARE NOW QUITE OBVIOUS. DOWN WITH THE CUBAN HYPOCRITE!!

His first reaction was sorrow over his omission in not telling Belle about his concluded purchase of her indenture papers. His second was shame, not for the act but for the terrible weapon he had furnished the enemies of the Society. He came eventually to a bitter hatred of Armand Heber, who had patently overdone their agreement.

'Not Heber,' Newton Pierce corrected his curse. 'Abel Arneson, assisted perhaps by John Haggarty. Ah Silas, could you not have found another solution to your personal dilemma?'

'Personal dilemma?' Silas repeated through shock stiff lips.

'Five thousand of these, Silas, one in the hand of each important citizen of Boston, and many in the hands of pure rabble rousers. All of our people were tendered a copy, and a bundle

was posted to Washington. I am afraid Adams will have a difficult time defeating the gag rules with this seemingly hypocritical occasion supporting the pro-slavery opposition.' Arthur Tappan sighed, as if he could see his years of anti-slavery efforts rushing madly down the Charles River into the uncaring sea.

'Will the OBSERVER and THE GAZETTE print denials?' Silas asked.

'Is there a denial, Silas?' Amos Stanton queried.

'No. But there is an explanation, gentlemen! I negotiated for Miss Merver's freedom through Armand Heber because there was no other way to secure her release from the abominable curse of slavery! You must know I did not buy her for a personal possession, nor to shade her destiny with a selfish cloud. However foolish this now seems, it was honorably intentioned. The quickest and easiest way I could move to free her of the runaway status and restore to her the dignity she deserved. Was it not you, Doctor Morse, who reminded me a few days ago that the fortune I despised because of its origin might now stand me in great stead? By God, were it possible I would buy the freedom of every slave in the world!'

'Amen, Brother Silas, but we do not live in a world operated on such principles,' the colored minister intoned. 'We are bound to free my people on the standards of justice and Godliness.'

They talked long, standing because each was too weary to sit. There seemed no resolve worth considering, short, Silas thought, of him doing one more drastic thing. No positive hint was passed, but he engendered a small idea that were he to publicly denounce his former beliefs and with decor and haste, depart Boston, the antislavery forces might turn upon him with telling effect upon the vitriol being expended upon them as a whole.

'There is no doubt that I am in bad favor with our own people, is there, Mr. Tappan?'

'First reactions are difficult to assess, Silas. We will know in a few days whether our friends are capable of withstanding this - this shock. But one thing is certain. To dispel the ugly inferences here suggested, Miss Merver is going to necessarily need a new place of refuge. If one further hint of impropriety, of personal intrigue occurs, no amount of missionary work could reclaim the faith of our constituents, let alone dull the teeth of our enemies. Do you understand this, Silas?'

The shock was back, rendering him incapable of logic. 'No.'

'But Silas - !'

And it came to him again, the deep inner excitement, the

echoing roar from the quarterdeck, the urge to crush the sea and confound the winds. He wadded the flimsy sheet and held it out, the corners thrusting at odd angles, the cheap paper crackling softly in his grasp.

'Goddamn them to Hell,' he rasped. 'I am a man, not a bilge rat! I have done a hundred things that our people have applauded and I have done another hundred things that have frustrated the enemy. I will not be censored for having done whatever I could to continue the gesture we've made in wrenching Belle from the devilish hands of the Quincy mob. Make whatever decision you choose, my friends, but I am going to abide by mine. Good evening, gentlemen!'

When they had left, Belle came silently from the dining room, her golden face split by a smile that melted Silas into a quivering heap. 'Whoowie,' she said. 'Fo' a crazy man you sho' talk some!'

He curled one hand around her neck, nearly the first time he had ever put a conscious hand to her. He massaged the smooth roundness, then sucked in a muchly needed breath.

'Did you understand about the poster, Belle?'

'You bought me from ol' man Abel,' she said.

'No. I bought your freedom. You're free - a chattel to no man. The shackles of slavery are forever off of your wrists.'

She giggled and leaned back into his curled palm. 'Shucks, one thing a yaller gal sho' got to have, Silas, thas a man to tell her what to do and when he want it done!'

When he said, 'Now,' she giggled again and shrugged sensuously as she turned and headed up the stairs to the bedrooms on the second floor. He followed her with the tread of a man on the way to the gallows.

Human frailties or unexpected strengths changed little; the blight lay over Boston, indeed, over the entire expanse of the burgeoning Colonies with an invisible weight that was felt by all and patently ignored by many. Abolitionism was not a disease begun in the ghettos nor the slave quarters of the wealthy. It was a disease totally removed from the black man's scope of understanding. Born a slave, and the son or daughter of a slave, the black man resented many facets of his existence, but he had not yet gotten around to thinking of abolitionism, nor the end of his servitude.

Abolitionism had begun as an economic revolution, a defiance aimed at thwarting the growing ebullence of those merchants who had aligned themselves with the Southerners, utilizing the

tremendous economic advantage of exploiting the hordes of black workers available to the Southern ruralities as well as the urbanites. Hardly more than a dozen negroes in all the land thought in terms of equality or 'rights', as defined by the intellects of the times. The number of whites who thought in terms of equality or human dignity were as few.

To Silas, the blight had taken on a personal aspect. He had chosen Boston as the jousting field because Boston had somehow become the center of American sentiment for anti-slavery endeavors, and because during his stay at the University of Madrid, he had heard exaggerated stories of Boston's determination to rid the northeastern states of slavery. For over a year, he had sat quietly, listening to the arguments and determinations of what had to be well-meaning citizens, trying desperately to align his own opinions and inclinations with those of the more active abolitionists. In the end, he had traded his own oddly spiritual convictions for a compromise with expediency.

He lay now, his lean but relaxed body smelling of passionate colored woman, his senses dulled yet sharpened by a total bout with lust. It had to be lust because despite his dedication to the black's cause, he lacked the wisdom of age and the experience to evaluate motives. His own motives were always ready to be explained with the intensity of youth; even as he listened to the sounds his black woman made, cleansing herself inwardly of his deposit and outwardly of her own perspiration, he thought of why and the reason for his happiness seemed flagrantly logical.

'Belle?' he called.

'Yes, man,' came the half breathless reply.

'Are you alright?'

Her giggle seemed personal to Silas, a private signal that she was not only alright but insanely pleased with her new role of mistress and bed mate. 'Sho' nough, Silas. I's fine.'

How much of his slow smile was vanity he had no way of understanding. His eyes closed languorously and he drifted into what he thought were serious contemplations of what had happened. He had finally taken her to his bed, an intention he now realized he had nurtured since the first time he had seen her beautiful face and unbelievable figure. His emotions were mixed; divided between masculine vanities and impersonal satisfactions, he felt solidly competent as a man.

Presently, he began to wonder why he did not feel the kind of elation his successes should have fostered. By the record, he had achieved several monstrous heights. For one, and the one he felt

most fondly about, he had taken a beautiful, passionate woman down and quickly turned her into a squealing, responsive female, panting, squirming and urging every fiber of her sensitive body to his demands. For two, he had transcended every hesitation shown by his abolitionist comrades. He had taken a slave, a colored slave, to his bed, crossing every badly defined line of hesitancy and committing himself to complete participation in their cause.

It was one thing to aid a runaway slave, or several. It was another to defend a physically harassed black against the master's whip, or to provide succor in extreme conditions. But he had taken a deeper plunge, a longer step. He had taken a mulatto woman to his breast and bed, and as he listened to what seemed her endless toiletry, he realized that he had also taken her to his heart. He hardly understood that the step he had taken was the final one, the ultimate in participation. He felt only that while others talked, he had acted, turning avowed intentions into fact.

Quite naturally, these thoughts shifted Silas into a degree of morbidity. He had for several months, felt somewhat alone, his private inclinations and beliefs silenced in the din of his comrades' voluble declarations. They seemed to be abolitionists directed by forces he did not recognize. They fought slavery for the economics of its advantages. He was rich beyond comparison, made so by the vast enterprises of King-Alvarez, a slave-holding company in a far-away land. Societies he privately felt were mewling and ineffectual, cried horror at the contingencies of the slave trade. He had stood on the gracefully manicured lawns and terraces of the Hacienda del King and watched the white man degrade and belabor the black man, securing the superiority he had obtained by ruthless cruelty and when required, cold blooded murder. His friends thought of slaves as unfortunates who needed the strength and determinations of a white man's culture plus the kind of physical power they would never think of delegating to a black man. Silas suspected that the years of his youth, spent largely among the unfortunate children of slaves, had given him an insight to the true character of the negro. He understood their basic natures, their fundamental worths and capabilities. To him, they were people, a segment of humanity created by the Catholic God he sometimes prayed to.

When Belle came out of the attached bathroom, he opened his eyes, brought instantly back to the now of their personal situation. She wore a filmy garment that failed to hide the full softness of her body nor mask the devastating shapes of which she was made. He dispersed the disappointment he felt at the

degree of her toiletry. She had scrubbed and tinted and powdered herself with obvious concern that he might find her less than perfect.

'You're beautiful,' he managed to say, holding out his abruptly trembling right hand. She came forward and placed a slim quintet of black fingers in his grasp.

'Well, I clean,' she admitted, turning to seat herself beside his suddenly restless hips. 'What you doing, man?'

He laughed boyishly and closed his arms around her, being boldly intimate to the point of possessiveness. It did not occur to him that what they proceeded to do was repetition, or violation of the many minutes she had spent repairing the first fury of his passions. Belle neither protested nor hesitated, lending herself to his lust with an unmeasured share of her own.

Doctor Henry Morse leaned on his elbows, the curve of his back expressing the weariness of his years and the unhappiness he felt. His three friends, Newton Pierce, Lewis Tappan and Fred Haversmith were equally tired, but there remained some serious talking to do, aided in temper by the thin goblets of Massachusetts wine and a deep dissatisfaction with what they considered an impossible situation. One of their number, for these were the backbone of Boston's abolitionist forces, had apparently abandoned their beginning force.

'There is no doubt, gentlemen,' the physician said, 'that a week, or perhaps a month with her will bring him to his senses, but the damage done in this period will be difficult to erase. I am inwardly moved to some form of violence, weighing the worth of Silas King's continued cooperation against the value of a mulatto woman.'

'Violence would do naught but anger him,' Lewis Tappan observed, dourly. 'Angered, Silas King is completely unpredictable. It is easy to forget that he is not, nor never has been, one of us. Moreover, he is young, a disease most of us have long since cured. I daresay that were any of us capable of remembering how positive we were at his age, we would find it easier to understand his total devotion to this woman.'

'She is a magnificent thing, I do admit,' Fred Haversmith said. 'So thought some twenty farm hands in my township, from time to time. I am slightly surprised that Abel Arneson consented to relinquish his ownership of Belle Merver!'

'She is then, a creature of - questionable morals?' Tappan

asked, already knowing of Belle's reputation in her own environment.

'She was a slave to Arneson, nineteen years old and as we know, comely beyond average,' Doctor Morse said wearily.

'What possibly can Silas hope to do with her?' Pierce asked.

'Drain his balls and satisfy his curious beliefs that negroes need only an opportunity to be as worthwhile as whites!' Haversmith blurted. 'I have never believed in slavery, but I do not require that my family take up with the shanty Irish nor the Cockney whelps! Damn, all this is idle talk and serves us no real purpose! What are we to do, gentlemen?'

'We need Silas,' Tappan admitted.

'It might be well to decide what we seek,' the doctor said. 'Do we seek the physical strength of Silas King, his endless supply of funds, and the vicious accuracy of that infernal cutlass, or do we seek to correct a youthful headiness suffered by one of our friends? I am not sure we are correctly intentioned, my friends. It may well be that we are pressed only by a reluctance to grow old! I am also not sure we are capable of judging the young Cuban!'

'Our judgments should only be based upon evidence, Henry.'

The doctor turned his eyes upon Tappan. His statement concerning evidence was typical; no man could publicly claim a greater dedication to abolitionism than Lewis Tappan, largely because he spared no words defining his opinions about slavery nor did he mince terms in defining his opponents' concerns about anti-slavery societies. He was rich, having shared his older brother's intensity in the matter of commercial industry, and he was wise because wisdom was a foundation stone of Tappan success. Morse nodded.

'The evidence is irrefutable, Lewis,' he agreed. 'Silas King has taken a mulatto woman to his breast, openly and with no hesitation concerning the ill effects it may have upon his avowed dedication to abolitionism. To do this, he bought her, as a slave holder, from her previous master, Abel Arneson. This could be an understandable move in lieu of a better way to free her from bondage. The ugly fact is that our enemies have seen fit to misinterpret his motives and to make public display of his follies. That's the evidence, Lewis, ignoring what we know to be facts. By our own choice, we are bound to find a way to nullify his folly. I think none of us possess even a small doubt about his sincerity. I do not propose that we abandon Silas King to his mistakes. He is and has always been, one of us, in spirit if not entirely in action.'

'Your resumé is admirable,' Tappan remarked dryly. 'It's

obvious failure lies in its inability to provide an answer to our dilemma.'

Doctor Morse sighed. 'It is nothing that can be instantly resolved, I'm afraid. I for one, am in favor of a night's sleep, in case one of those miracles of judgment should occur in the early hours, normally reserved for barking dogs and mattress lumps!'

The four stood up, tired, confused and frustrated with a new brand of helplessness. They shook hands solemnly, then departed into the settling fog. Doctor Morse for a long time stood staring at the front door, ashamed of the fact, that, superimposed on its paneling, was not the lean arrogance of Silas King but the bold sensuousness of Belle Merver.

CHAPTER FIVE

Many things changed for Silas, pleasing him greatly. Never one to smile much nor view matters from an amused point of view, he welcomed Belle's subtle sense of humor and her reactions to things he thought to be serious. There was the matter of buying her some clothing, a task he knew nothing about, but one she handled with amazing efficiency. If her choice of garments was a bit on the gauche side, he had too little experience to be a proper judge.

Restricted by her obvious color from shopping in Boston's more elegant emporiums, she plunged into the 'permissive marts' with both hands full of money and a mind cultured by two hundred years of primitive logic; 'fancy' she defined with a flourish and when Silas admired her questionable taste, she chalked the entire affair up to her rapidly growing opinions as to what was right and what was for somebody else. It mattered not at all to Belle Merver that Minnie Kelly shuddered with instinctive disapproval and that Tom Cleveland licked his lips in appreciation for his master's woman. She wore her new finery with the flounce of a harlot and basked in Silas' adoration.

More changed than Belle's appearance. With money and the 'new' freedom she enjoyed as part of Silas' unspoken plan to make her feel the importance of her position, she began to think.

Suddenly possessed of privileges she was led to believe she deserved, she began to assume a position no one had foreseen. Silas was the last to know; Minnie Kelly counted Belle's new stature as something to be expected from a 'nigger wench', and Tom Cleveland, along with two or three of the street tradesmen, accepted her assumed royalty as a condition of her service to the young master.

Belle hated black people, and made no attempt to hide her animosity except from Silas. Somehow she understood that he had peculiar feelings for Negroes, based upon antecedents she knew nothing about. If she sat for hours, listening to his odd stories about his youth in Cuba, and later in Spain, she made no attempt to relate these experiences and attitudes to herself. When she became bored with his often vehement tirades against whites who grew rich at the expense of suffering blacks, she reverted to her sensuousness and changed the subject to areas she felt capable of handling. She decided privately that he was considerably over-sexed and she delighted in her ability to match his virility.

Within a few days, Belle armed herself against displacement with a positive pattern. If Silas showed displeasure or impatience or any disturbing emotion, Belle took him to bed. On the occasions when he was visited by old friends who somehow left him cross and dissatisfied, she cheered him with her body and her tendency to laugh. When he returned from Boston's mysterious metropolitan complications, his handsome young face hardened with doubts or disappointments, she met him with softness and surrender. She often listened to his voluble complaints about how the abolitionist cause was progressing, or to details of some failure of the anti-slavery people to persevere, erasing the problem from her mind and later from his, by becoming intimately demanding and personally rewarding.

With each success, Belle became more positive that as long as she knew when and how to appeal directly to the man in Silas, she was in control, and Silas never refuted her private opinions. Her confidence increased when several unavoidable circumstances failed to make her pregnant; she decided with no evidence to substantiate her suspicions, that it was not possible to become impregnated by the impressively endowed half-Spaniard, half-Englishman and she became gloriously careless. Silas wallowed in her seeming indifference, privately believing she had availed herself of one of the chemical formulas being shipped to America from the shores of England. They were very happy.

Summer in Boston invariably brought strange moments of high intrigue and violent solution. Occasionally it rained, often enough to plague street vendors and those who had surrendered to the agony of unbearable heat. Silas suffered less than most and put it down to the fact that he had been born and raised only a few kilometers from Havana and had spent his early years traveling the tropical areas of the world. The facts were that he was young and lean and not overly subjective to chance surroundings. Moreover, his private life, with some few exceptions, had developed into a pleasurable round of animal exuberances. His Beacon Hill house was large and properly staffed with competent servants, and he had long ago learned to like bland American food and the fashion of Massachusetts gentility.

Within a duo of weeks, the war he fought had relegated itself to one of private dimensions; he was not displeased to discover that his abolitionist companions often ignored him when meetings or rallies were held, because he differed in opinion as to the worth of meetings and rallies, and his enforced privacy gave him more time for Belle. It also gave him more opportunity for extra-curricular activities, many of which he did not recognize until they were history. A mulatto girl named Martha was his first deviate adventure.

She was blacker than Belle, but cut of the same sensual cloth. She approached him with nearly surreptitious quiet as he sat in a public house, perusing the latest copy of the GAZETTE, a recently revived periodical with strong anti-slavery leanings.

'Mistuh King, please,' she murmured, hardly loud enough to be heard above the rustle of his newspaper.

'Oh,' he said, looking up at the darkly still shadow to his right. His glance was a quick inventory; she was poorly clad, clean enough and neat with the precision of a properly instructed houseservant. Her black wool was partially covered by what had to be a too-warm *rebosa*, tucked into a high collar of a seedy coat. Almost instantly, he catalogued her as a servant, a slave no doubt, of a wealthy Bostonian whom he had no instant way of identifying.

He owed his second glance to Belle Merver. The girl was merely wearing the ill-formed clothes. Her skin was chocolate smooth and drawn tightly over even features, neither African nor Caucasian. Her lips were a familiar bluish red, parted slightly to reveal teeth as white as pearls and as even as piano keys. From there, his natural maleness sent his eyes down, nearly invisible fingers searching the shapes beneath the old coat. He even sensed that the brown black body perspired in the summer heat, and his

heritage furnished his aquiline nose with an odor. Her ankles, barely showing below the uneven hem of a gray skirt, were trim, leading into boney feet possessing all the flaws he had learned to tolerate and ignore.

'Yes?' he offered.

'Mistuh King. My name be Martha. I've run away,' she announced softly. 'I used to belong Mistuh Gruder. Adolph B. Gruder.'

Silas frowned. He glanced around the restaurant to see if anyone were paying attention. No one seemed interested in a stylishly garbed young man and a most unstylish colored girl. But he instantly raised his right hand from the newspaper in a quieting gesture, his ears still hearing her plaintive confession of having 'run away' as an accusatory certainty. He did not know Adolph Gruder, but this was not important if he owned papers proving he had a legal title to a slave named Martha. His first question was logical. 'When did you run away, Martha?'

'Yestiddy, Mistuh King. I ain't nevah goin' back, neither!'

Shot with alarm, Silas took another look around the public house, then with deliberate hands, folded the periodical and put it into an outer pocket of his Edwardian coat. He arose, inspecting the tavern's clients with cautious eyes. A second thought came to him then, and he tore a long narrow strip from the folded newspaper. On this he wrote an address, a loft rented by the New England Anti-Slavery Society but seldom used anymore. He handed it to Martha.

'Go there. It is safe. Wait for me, no matter how long it is. You will be out of danger there, and I shall come.'

'Yassah,' she husked, taking the paper. Without looking about her, she turned and went out the side door, marked 'Colored Exit'. Silas chewed his upper lip, angered by the sign and by a sudden feeling of having plunged into a situation about which he did not have sufficient understanding. The understanding came later.

When he arrived at the loft on East Main Street its normally deserted spaces were interrupted by Martha, and she was naked, her lush body sprawled purposefully on a well spread drapery, taken from the wall behind the speaker's podium, her carefully discarded clothes piled neatly on a slat-backed chair.

Money solved his puzzles but did not provide an answer. Twice more within a week, he was approached by seemingly helpless Negroes, told some quaint story about mistreatment

and a resolve to run away, and launched into an episode of lust he did not try to evade. In these adventures, he used what seemed to Silas to be a perfectly patterned escape route from the garbled demands and semi-hysterical pleas his impromptu lovers made; he paid each generously and proposed a secondary escape from their private troubles.

After Agatha, the third, he stood at the window of the loft, his eyes searching the street below for some evidence of skullduggery. None seemed to threaten. He weighed the wildly incoherent tales he had been told against the facts. Each had been comely, sexually adept and clumsily unconvincing. But the three wanton women had all made pleas of a similar nature; Agatha had even demanded to know if she wasn't a better 'fuck' than Belle Merver.

But no matter their primary motivations, all had succumbed to the power of Silas' dollars. He had no way of knowing whether or not any of them had actually run away from their legal masters, and strangely, he had generated no will to prove them liars or frantic escapees. Finished with each, he had selfishly faced the inevitable truths of his position. He didn't love any of them and none had surpassed Belle in either looks or passion. In each of the three adventures, he had furnished enough money to free his conscience of indictment; he absolved himself of carelessness by reiterating a long held opinion that there was little logic and no great progress to be made in freeing one or two or a dozen slaves by violent obstruction of the law.

But, he decided, what he had done for Belle was having unwanted, if pleasant reverberations. He had no doubt that in the long run, such flagrant behavior would consign him to a brand of trouble he could not survive and a kind his abolitionist friends could never tolerate. The other side of the coin was more intrinsically defined. He was young, handsome, rich, and capable of physical expenditures of sensuality needing only an hour or two to revive his private passions for Belle. He thought not once of his infidelity; he was a Spaniard at heart, a Cuban by birth, and an unsatiable youth in his own right.

Any concern he felt was nearly political. He knew well the vulnerability of his status in Boston. He could see without looking, the faces of the anti-slavery societies, member by member. The women were lined, strict, overly religious and as dedicated to their narrow thought processes as were the pro-slavery groups. The men were hardly different, many of them driven to assume an anti-position by the influences of their feminine counterparts. Others based their opinions on the balance sheets run on their

respective commercial ventures. Few cared about a black man or a black woman as a human being, fewer even understood the primitive nature of a transplanted African. Most abolitionists of both sexes shouted long and loud about equality under God's eyes when what they really meant was equality under the dollar. Many were politically ambitious, using pro or anti as a springboard, calculated to hurl them into popularity with certain elements of the economy.

Silas was fooled by none of this, largely because he could not forget how important the black man was to the economy of his own empire. The fact that Don Alvarez del Prado controlled and managed King-Alvarez, in Cuba as well as in several other spots on the gold-encrusted earth, made only a slight difference to Silas. That difference was personal. Silas did not believe in slavery, not because the economics of slavery were important to King-Alvarez, but because as a child, some seed of hatred had been planted and cultivated for the principle of empathy. He knew well that certain differences existed between the white mind and the black mind, but he knew a similar difference existed between white minds and white minds, just as not all black minds reacted with equal responses.

He thought about Martha and Felice and Agatha, and his youth forged a steel garment that locked in a certain weakness. He could not effectively separate a black female from a black male; he was able only to decide what he wanted from each and when he departed the loft, his step was quick with satisfaction. That he had been able to buy each of the lusty trio from their demands, or at least, from their basic aims, only convinced him that Silas King was more of a man than Boston gave him credit for being.

Melba Stanhope did not enter the study soundlessly, first because she was a heavily formed English girl never noted for grace nor caution, and secondly because noise was the best way to alert Arthur Tappan to the necessity of intruding upon his privacy.

The graying merchant looked up from the papers he was perusing, his lined face drawn in momentary displeasure. 'Yes?' he demanded.

'A gentleman, sir,' Melba said, curtsying clumsily. 'A Señor Alfonso del Purdy, sir.' With this announcement, she placed an impressively engraved card on the desk in front of Tappan. He looked at it, stared momentarily, then made some mental note about the ignorance of professional ignoramuses. The card,

handsomely engraved, plainly stated that the caller was Señor Alvarez del Prado, *Gerente*; Institucion King-Alvarez, Habana, Cuba, Territoria de Española.

Tappan brightened, his instincts sharper than his memory. He had dedicated his life to the merchandising of cotton goods and the abolishment of slavery. A Cuban *gerente*, particularly one who made calls at nine-fifteen on Tuesday nights, had to be important in one of the two areas. Cuba was an active market for woven textiles, and it was admittedly the western depot for the multitude of illegitimately transported slaves from the coast of Africa. He came to his feet, shuffling the half read papers into a sheaf as he removed his suit coat from the back of the chair. The papers he placed in a drawer, the coat he handed to his maid, turning so his out-thrust hand would find the sleeve when she held the garment properly.

'Help me, then settle my cravat. What does he look like?'

'A rum one, veddy handsome he is, sir.'

'Yes. Of what age?'

'Perhaps fifty, perhaps more. A beautiful beard and fine clothes, sir. A puffed gentleman if ever I saw one. You'll see him in here, sir?'

'Indeed,' Tappan replied, holding his two chins high so she could arrange his English tie under the crocheted fall of his collar. 'Bring tea as soon as it can be heated, Melba.'

'Hot a'ready,' she informed him. 'I'll show him in.'

'No. I'll greet him personally. Hasten with the tea.'

Melba sniffed and took a side door toward the Tappan kitchens, Arthur, his face drawn with righteous curiosity, made his way to the central hall and into the sitting room. The lean man in the blazingly white suit rose from his chair like a liquid cat.

'Señor Tappan?' he asked in a nearly silken voice.

'Mr. Arthur Tappan, at your service, Don Alvarez.'

'I am sorry. I speak excellent English but am moved to use my native tongue under emotional stress. I am most happy to meet you, sir.'

'I am honored,' Tappan said. They shook hands, patently an alien accomplishment for the Spaniard in that he used none of the pressure Tappan sensed lurked in the long slim, perfectly manicured fingers.

'Be seated, I beg of you, Don Alvarez,' the merchant pled. 'My servant will bring tea in a moment. What may I do in service to your needs, Señor?'

The Spaniard smiled at the use of 'señor' obviously a foreign

word on the Bostonian's lips because of its mispronouncement and faulty accent. 'I have come to you because a mutual acquaintance remarked that you are one of my ward's most appreciated comrades. Silas King de Acquilantos is my ward, Señor Tappan.'

For a moment, understanding closed Arthur Tappan's mouth. With the preceding announcement, he knew exactly to whom he spoke: in a drawer of his private files rested a folder containing a wealth of facts about Don Alvarez del Prado and the company known throughout the nether world as King-Alvarez. On the face of it, the handsome Spanish gentleman was a bitter enemy, a prime criminal by every standard avowed by the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Not only had he been an active kidnapper of unsuspecting Africans, he had worked diligently at transporting unfortunate blacks to permanent servitude in the foulest of ships under the most horrendous conditions. He had dealt in them, as a merchant and a land-holder, ruthlessly amassing a fortune at the expense of God's less fortunate children; he was a slaver, a slave owner, and a dastard.

But Arthur Tappan was not a fool. Within the last two or three weeks, Silas King had become a positive problem, despite his faith in abolitionism. Even now, Tappan suspected that the half-Cuban youth lolled wantonly in the arms of a mulatto girl of questionable character and unquestionable attractiveness. His own years as a man of intrepid merchandising gave him a second insight; Don Alvarez del Prado was the *Gerente* of a massive enterprise and it was based in Havana, Cuba, fully eighteen hundred sea miles to the south. The distance was too great, demanding too many days at sea, to permit a man of Alvarez' importance to visit Boston on a purely innocuous holiday. This enemy had come to his door at this late hour for a definite reason. Which Arthur Tappan was bound to discover.

'Your ward is indeed, one of my closest associates,' he ventured. 'He lives merely a few minutes walk from this house.'

'I know, Señor Tappan. I was not seeking direction. I am in search of enlightenment. Bluntly, one of my business associates who should remain unnamed, has informed me that my ward, being young and relatively inexperienced in the ways of the world, has involved himself with a type of unpleasantness that may bring serious repercussions in the society he has chosen to join.'

Tappan smiled. 'Your English is not only excellent, it is adept, Mr. Alvarez! Your informant was perhaps overly alarming, but among his friends, Silas has raised some doubts as to his ability

to act — with unerring judgment. He is in no immediate trouble, but he may be courting distress. Do I make myself understandable?"

It was Alvarez' turn to smile. "To a man who had courted trouble in many lands, only a few well chosen words are needed to convey understanding. I already know of your sentiments toward slavery, Mr. Tappan, and I presume you, by now, have remembered your information about mine. In this matter, concerning my ward and your friend, may we ignore natural animosities and work toward a natural solution of our mutual problems?"

The tea arrived, providing an easy moment of relaxation between the two men. Tappan was slightly at a loss to understand the ease with which Alvarez accepted their political differences. He was used to hard-nosed, nearly violent rebuttal of his beliefs. How a man whose lifeblood he coveted could be so calm and gracious and unconcerned about their differences he did not fully comprehend, but because Arthur Tappan was a gentleman before he was an anti-slavery addict, he maintained what he hoped was equal sophistication. He privately despised himself for liking Alvarez and he was disagreeably pleased when the Spaniard listened to his accounting of Silas King and Belle Merver without showing much concern.

"— this has been a precarious period, nearly four weeks in duration, and seemingly at no end, despite the open disapproval of his friends. To you, sir, I suppose his apparent indifference is an admirable sign, but I assure you that his unparalleled behavior has wrought much concern among his friends," Tappan concluded. "We are at a loss as to how to return him to the fold, as it were."

Alvarez toyed with the dregs of his tea. He showed no facial response and no physical sign of distress. Finally he smiled again, the slow, friendly up-drag of his mouth corners could hardly be misunderstood. He was genuinely appreciative of Tappan's problem.

"Reminding you, sir, that we have declared a truce for the moment, I would also remark that what you have recounted alarms me greatly," the Spaniard said. "You see, to me, there is no question of right or wrong concerning slavery as an institution. My concern for Silas has little to do with why he has departed your society. My concern is purely that of a guardian, a man who is morally responsible for another man's welfare in a difficult world. In the main, we have simply observed the failure of a man to adhere to what he had declared to be his life's endeavor. May I remark the facts?"

'Please do, Mr. Alvarez,' Tappan hastened to reply.

'They may be unpleasant, but I believe they express the truth. Silas King is barely twenty. He is very rich, and moderately well traveled. He is also vigorous, and part of his vigor dangles manfully from the hair of his near-boyish belly. You have gone to some lengths to describe Belle Merver as a beauty, brown or black or bright red! I am personally well aware of the attraction that can be expressed by a nigger wench. Couple this with Silas' avowed determination to cultivate abolitionism and you have an answer to his seeming desire to nurture the mulatto girl. If one considers this ruthless evaluation, and adds to it the certainty that Silas holds vastly different opinions of abolitionism, his apparent free-thinking in the matter of Belle Merver can be understood. At our age and our experience, we may not agree with his indelicate actions, but less forty years apiece, I'm sure we can understand his physical procedures. May I add, for your edification, Mr. Tappan, that I doubt that Silas has ever taken a white woman to bed?'

'Good Heavens!' Tappan murmured, not revealing whether his surprise was at Alvarez' boldness or at the idea that a handsome, rich and finely bred young man had confined his sexual antics to colored women.

'You have helped me greatly,' Alvarez admitted. 'I now know how to approach my ward to some advantage. Your problem, Mr. Tappan, seems greater than mine. I am required only to see that no harm, self-induced or incidental, comes to Silas. Yours is to return a seemingly wayward associate to what I think is a not overly attractive cause so that he may serve your designs effectively. May I tender my heartfelt thanks for this audience, and on the morrow, I shall visit my ward, possessing more information than I'm sure he would have volunteered!'

Somehow, Tappan felt bested, or at least, felt ill at ease. They stood and passed amenities for a few seconds, then slowly moved toward the front hall and the stained glass door. They were two men, sworn to hate each other, but strangely empathetic. There was still one question Arthur Tappan wanted to ask and the courage did not gather until Alvarez was at the door.

'I am curious, Mr. Alvarez,' he finally said. 'Do I infringe upon our brief association by asking how a man of your obvious intelligence can stand so deeply in the shadow of an abomination like the servitude of a fellow human being?'

Alvarez laughed, a new note to his voice. 'It is permissible, *amigo*. You see, I was raised in a land that considered the nigger

hardly more than a hairless ape, and learned, after considerable decades what his black hide was good for. Nearly sixty years of personal contact with the nigger has taught me nothing new, nothing contradictory to what my ancestors believed. I do not hate niggers. I have simply learned to use them as the Almighty intended them to be used. Good night, señor, and may you prosper!"

Tappan stood in the open door, abruptly alone. A fresh weight depressed him; despite his experiences in England, at symposiums reviling slavery, in courts from Salem to Washington, D.C., the small measures of success he had counted as important now seemed meaningless. In less than thirty minutes, a rascal Spaniard had nearly wrecked his best logic, with a calmness of a Holy Man and the smile of an angel.

None the less, before he retired, Arthur Tappan sat down and penned several emphatic notes to influential friends. The truce was ended and Don Alvarez del Prado was once more numbered among vital enemies.

CHAPTER SIX

Once an early riser, Belle had taught him some new games to be played while the rest of Boston struggled with the problems of a fresh day. Silas had learned quickly; Minnie Kelly had taken more time and Tom Cleveland refused to even try. Lethargy following a gray dawn seemed to suit Belle to a T. When the front door rang boisterously on this Wednesday morning, it was regarded in four different manners. Before it ceased to bob on its spring-loaded cord, Minnie was there, brushing her stubborn hair into a decided mat of mouse brown. Mostly she anticipated a vendor's plea so the sleek foreign looking gentleman and the exquisite lady surprised her.

She bent a thick Irish knee out of surprise more than because of subservience. 'A good day to you, sir and madam. The master is not yet receiving guests,' she managed to say.

The Spanish gentleman smiled. 'He'll receive us, I'm sure. Will you inform Mr. King that Señor Alvarez and Señora King await

his appearance? More specifically, his guardian and his step-mother, my woman.'

Minnie was not mentally equipped for such news. She stood, staring at the elegant woman who had been identified as her master's stepmother. She was beautiful, finely dressed and exquisitely groomed. She carried something of a foreign look on her face, too, and Minnie felt overwhelmed by foreigners. Unable to speak, she broadened the door opening and stepped back to permit the obviously distinguished guests to enter the house. Personally, she was caught in a trap; Silas had long ago informed her that until he made an appearance under his own powers he was not to be disturbed, yet filling the small central hall were guests of patent authority and importance. The very manner in which the elegant lady boldly appraised the interior of the house spelled possessiveness, concern. The neatly bearded man seemed less concerned, but no less elegant.

'Well?' he reminded Minnie as they moved into the parlor.

'Oh, yessir!' she gasped and turned to scurry for the stairs. Her haste faded as she reached the second floor and Silas' sleeping chamber loomed as a closed door behind which she suspected intriguing antics were being enacted. Momentarily, she was at a loss to understand why she risked instant dismissal, merely to please an autocratic Spanish gentleman she had never seen before and did not know from Adam. Hesitantly, she moved forward and knocked on the forbidden door.

'I'll be down in a minute, Minnie,' Silas said to the knock.

Swiftly, he tucked in the skirt of his ruffled shirt, then manipulated the continental, nearly nautical fore-flap of his finely tailored trousers. He did not glance at the languorously lazy figure still in the bed. He had suddenly grown hard-faced and somehow older, a change that had occurred almost instantly he had peered out of the many-paned window at the carriage in the street below, attended by a man in a sea-faring uniform of whites, a grizzled man with graying hair and a painfully straight back. Silas had not seen Captain Nello in several years but he was a man not easily forgotten even had he not numbered among the few Cubans Silas revered. Aside from flashes, he also became certain that the hand on the downstairs bell pull belonged to Don Alvarez del Prado.

This was a complication unexpected but long anticipated. Silas further complicated matters by debating the worth of a coat or the privilege of shirt sleeves. He decided on shirt sleeves, certainly

a more friendly and appropriate approach to old acquaintances than a Bond Street suit jacket. As dressed as he felt was required, he hesitated at the side of the bed, staring hotly down at the half smiling face among the fluffed quilting.

'An old friend has called, my dear,' he said to Belle. 'A very old friend from another part of my life. I am going down to greet him properly. Please remain here until I call, or until I send word to you. Will you do that, Belle?'

'Sho, man,' she replied. 'He rich too?'

Silas smiled. 'Very rich. Probably one of the richest men I know. I won't be too long, my darling.'

She squeezed her big eyes together in agreement. Silas leaned over and kissed her mouth, already dry from previous kisses and the early hour. Then he reluctantly left her and went to the hall door. He had forgotten her almost before he had turned away. He respected no man in the world as he did *papacita*. Privately, Silas believed he feared no man; but the wrinkle across his brow as he nodded to Minnie and started down the stairs was patently one of worry. It deepened quickly when the first person he saw through the beaded curtain of the parlor door was his stepmother, Elena King.

'Why, mother, how delightful!' he exclaimed, and met her rising with a full and emphatic *embrazo*. She seemed shorter and thinner than he remembered her, then he recalled that in the three years since he'd seen her, he had gone from seventeen to twenty and nature had boosted him and thickened him and had, with respect, passed the processes in question as they referred to Elena. She was slight and warm and she smelled of expensive Spanish perfumes. Her lips to his cheek were cool and soft.

'Ah, *querido*!' she breathed. 'You have become so handsome and so huge! I fear Havana will not know you any longer!'

'I fear Havana may not get the opportunity for many months,' Don Alvarez said, stepping forward with his arms spread. Silas let go of Elena and turned into the surprisingly powerful embrace his guardian tendered. Alvarez too, smelled of fine Spanish toilet water, although the odor of good tobacco was rapidly winning. Silas used his strength and Don Alvarez grunted with proper response. '*Por Dios*! You have become a giant, Silas! Ah, but you look well, a bit drawn perhaps, but well. *Perdone, mi hijo*, but we came early out of pure excitement. You are well?'

'*Magnifico, papacita*! And you?'

'Old, but healthy. Your mother is well, too. She tends to become ill at sea, but the *Grenita* is not that barbarous!'

'You came in the brig,' Silas said positively. 'I saw Captain Nello from my window.'

'*Es verdad*. She is fast and handy, and she belongs to King-Alvarez. At the moment, she is warped to the questionable pier of The Turco Companies.'

Silas frowned. Don Alvarez smiled. 'But you forget, *amigo*, we are of different politics. No mind. We are here and have achieved our end. You are well, and apparently - ' he looked about the expensively decorated parlor, - 'well in command.'

'Breakfast, or at least, American coffee, grown in Cuba! - will be ready upon desire. Mother, have you breakfasted?'

Elena blinked, unused to being called mother by anyone, particularly her step-son. She stood before the chair she had recently abandoned, her hands clutching the gold-beaded handbag that matched the stole around her shoulders. Her smile was tardy and gentle.

'Yes, Silas. Coffee will be sufficient. Your Boston mornings are a bit difficult, I think.'

Silas, who had not hoped to relax, found himself strangely at ease. There was light discussion of mundane matters, the temper of the voyage from Havana, the status of politics, the small problems of extensive commercialism, and with flashes of personal interest, the contingencies of life in Havana and Boston. Shortly, Minnie appeared and announced that breakfast was served in the dining room. Once more the gracious host, Silas led his step-mother into the dining room, where Minnie had outdone herself setting a proper table for gentry. Sparkling glass and gleaming silver weighted the Irish damask tablecloth. Silas was pleased, knowing well that Minnie had been impressed by his Cuban family.

Elena and Alvarez took nothing but coffee but Silas demanded a laden plate of eggs and Massachusetts ham with purely American potatoes. He was chided about his fabulous appetite and congratulated on the flavor of the coffee. Then without a warning, Don Alvarez exploded a bombshell.

'We arrived yesterday afternoon, Silas. I took advantage of the opportunity to have preliminary conversation with a friend of yours. An Arthur Tappan, of East Cambridge. I was, you see, at a loss to know exactly how to face you, our politics being incompatible concerning the matter of slavery. He was very friendly, and informative, I might add.'

Silas had ceased to eat with almost the first words Alvarez had spoken. He sat now, not chewing, and not aware of the huge

partially sampled plate under his chin. The hand holding his silver fork settled to the table and he stared at nothing somewhere between himself and Elena. His first move after Alvarez spoke was to turn and make an eye signal to Minnie. She approached, and in nearly soundless tones, he told her to summon Miss Merver. Then he faced Don Alvarez and his stepmother.

'I presume you expect me to launch forth into volumes of explanations, even apologies? I think you forget that beneath any façade I may display, I am still a King. Kings, I've been led to believe, are not prone to explanations nor apologies.'

'Silas, I did not mean - ' Don Alvarez raised a placating palm. Then he laughed. 'Yes, I did mean! I am noted for lying only in the interest of making a doubloon! I am not concerned about the gold you have seen fit to dispense to your well-meaning comrades. No man could possibly spend money as fast as the *Banco de Holanda* enlarges our accounts! Oddly, I do not resent your devotion to a system of human relationships about which I have no faith. America and it's late developing conscience is not a problem of mine, either. Among my responsibilities, two or three loom as vital. First, I am bound to see to the success of King-Alvarez, the unfeeling mother of the only friendship I have ever acknowledged. Secondly, I am committed to the unrelenting responsibility of furthering the wishes and capabilities of my deceased partner's son. That, Silas, is you. *Por Dios!* Your dearest friends have told me that for the charms of a nigger wench, you have abandoned those who have held great faith in your dedication. The cause is immaterial. The son of Jacob King must never be accused of softness, of retracted purpose, for the sake of a nigger wench!'

'Your words are offensive to me, Don Alvarez,' Silas growled.

Elena wiped her lips on a snow-white napkin, but she did not speak nor did her eyes question either man.

Silas thought of a hundred things to say and his lips produced none of them. Had Alvarez berated him for many things, his abolitionist beliefs, his appearance, his residence, or his admittedly heavy-handed spending, he would have been quick with a defense. Being accused of breaking faith, of evading a responsibility, even to Alvarez' acknowledged enemies, was difficult to refute. Moreover, he had not been completely aware of his own failures, if any existed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, his confusion was arrested by the sudden appearance of Belle in the dining room doorway.

Like Minnie, she had suffered an acute case of impression, beginning after Silas' rather cold departure, augmented by a

glance out the window at the magnificently appointed carriage and four, occupied by two footmen and a precisely uniformed sea captain, who in his own right, would have commanded respect from Belle Merver. She had immediately set about turning her lazy, sleep-drugged person into a gorgeous brown flower, as she understood flowers.

The result was startling, at least to Silas. He stared at her, at the fine gold necklace around her smooth throat, then on down to the manner in which her large breasts snugged into the flowered gown, forming her silhouette into a perfect if sensual replica of an hour glass. Her very slim ankles seemed even slimmer; Silas knew that the narrow, neatly buttoned shoes she wore were toe-benders and painful, but she stepped slowly forward without wincing. He stood up rapidly.

'Miss Belle Merver. Belle, I'd like you to meet my stepmother, Señora Elena King de Sandini, and my god-father, Señor Don Alvarez del Prado. Incidentally, this is my family of which I am monstrously proud!'

Belle's bow of acknowledgment was hardly more than a downward nod of her head, accomplished by bowing her slim neck in a bird-like way. Don Alvarez, only slightly slower to his feet than Silas had been, bowed with Continental grace. Elena nodded slowly and smiled, almost in obvious defeat. Silas stepped sideways and pulled back an ornately backed chair and Belle sat down at what would be his left hand when he resumed his seat.

Alvarez waited until her coffee was poured and she had had a chance to refuse the breakfast Minnie suggested she have. Then he laid one manicured hand beside his empty plate and toyed with the scalloped edge of the china. His eyes did not meet Silas'. He fastened them on Belle, and felt a flash of amusement lighten their Spanish black.

'I am impressed by the astuteness of my ward's taste, Miss Merver. She is quite beautiful, is she not, Señora Elena?' He did not wait for Elena's agreement or refutation. 'It so happens, Miss Merver, that we were just discussing my ward's decision to place his affection for you above the loyalties he has sworn for the New England Anti-Slavery Society. We had not discussed the worth of either, only the necessity of a man standing faithfully to the standards of his commitments!'

Belle obviously understood neither the words nor the inferences of Alvarez' untempered vitriol. But there was no misunderstanding his unfriendliness. She looked at Silas for a cue to a proper response. His black face was no help, his patent anger frightened

her as much as did the cold mien of the elegant Spanish gentleman. Almost at once, she became Belle Merver, the slave girl, accepting harassment and cowering under the possible following blow. Split seconds before, she had been too proud of herself to speak. Now she was too afraid, too aware of her own shortcomings to challenge her adversary.

Words like gloved fists slipped from Alvarez' lips, each hammering new fright into Belle's confused brain. Silas controlled his fury only because he was well bred and duly respectful of the speaker. When Alvarez gracefully finished his cruelty, Silas again stood up.

'I think we should retire to more comfortable conditions,' he said. 'Belle, it might be appropriate if you retired to your own rooms - upstairs.'

'Yes, sir,' she murmured, not realizing these were the first words she had spoken since entering the dining room and that they were murmured in a voice she had not used in several weeks.

As she stood up, Alvarez came to his feet in gentlemanly acknowledgment. Belle nodded goodbye to Elena, then to the unsmiling Spaniard. Only Silas' trailing hand touched hers to keep her from feeling entirely like a dismissed slave girl.

When she was gone, Silas turned to Alvarez. 'I am of a mind to kill you, sir!' he snarled.

Alvarez laughed. 'I should not raise a hand to defend myself! But I am disposed to remark that I was only attempting to penetrate the veil of glamour you seem to have adorned her with, Silas. No matter what she seemed to you, she is nothing more than a nigger wench to those who know the breed. Am I not correct, Señora Elena?' he finished his speech looking down at Silas' stepmother.

Seemingly unangered, she stood up and smiled briefly at Alvarez, then turned to Silas. 'I shall attend her, Silas. She seemed desperately in need of a friend.'

'Thank you, señora,' Silas murmured gratefully.

During her leisurely journey to the second floor of the Acorn Street dwelling, a dozen probabilities flicked through Elena King de Sandini's mind, her first concern being that Don Alvarez del Prado would never suffer in the kind of hell he deserved. She knew him well, and had been subject to his peculiar code of existence for nine years. She knew he did not hate Negroes. He merely did not consider them in the light of human beings. This was almost personal because he also knew that she, Elena King, was

not as purely white as the rest of the world thought her to be.

Why he had tolerated her as the Señora King for so many years she did not understand. At times, she took some pleasure in deciding that his tolerance was due to the certainty that not once since Jacob King had inadvertently wedded her, had there been a moment when she had not lived up to her marital responsibilities. In thinking this, she conveniently forgot the few times when some stalwart buck from the Hacienda del King's slave quarters mysteriously disappeared. That she had never been emotionally attached to any of her misjudgments had freed Elena of any constrictions of conscience. By her standards, she was truly an honorable woman. At the moment, searching for Belle's private rooms, she was tensed by the unfailing sense of survival that had guided her for nearly a decade. Then she saw the garish figure of Belle, seated upon the edge of an obviously undisturbed bed.

At that hour, the unused bed in Belle Merver's room spoke volumes to a mentality as acute as Elena's. She ignored the certainty that the bed had not been used the previous night and stepped inside the doorway, pulling the heavy paneled door securely closed behind her. Belle turned an unteared face to her, mouth slack, eyes large but tearless.

'Are you all right?' Elena asked softly.

'Sho,' Belle replied. 'He some nasty ol' man, ain't he?'

'I've lived under the same roof with him for nearly ten years,' Elena felt moved to say.

'Whooie! You like me, ain't you, Señora King?'

'Like you?'

'Some nigger, some white.'

It came as a bucket of icy water but Elena had spent too many years in the sterility of pretense to show her surprise. But she was alarmed because in all of her strange life, no one but her father had ever reminded her of the Negro blood in her flawless veins. That it was a guess on Belle's part was obvious, but the fact that the mulatto had dared guess at all was frightening. To the several small indications that Elena had become aware of herself, she was forced to add one or two lately developed characteristics as yet uncatalogued, but apparently noticeable to the mulatto girl. But Elena was too well schooled in behavior to confess or to show alarm.

'Of course not. Why should you assume such a thing?'

'I seen you when he was a'layin' it on me.'

'You've guessed wrongly, my dear.'

"Why you here, then?"

"Should I leave, Miss Merver?"

"Stay. Silas send you?"

"No. But I think he appreciates my friendliness."

Belle sniffed. 'Ain't goin' to make no diff'rence to him."

"How can you be sure? Don Alvarez is very influential. In fact, he is the only father Silas has. His real father was murdered nearly nine years ago."

"He tole me, Missus King. All 'bout Jerome and the cutlass. He still got it, and sometimes he take it out and practice with it. He only look like a boy, Mrs. King. He really quite a man!"

"Are you in love with him, Miss Merver?"

Belle shifted sensuously on the bed. "Yeller gal got to have a man," she explained. "He loves me, Mrs. King."

Painfully, Elena surveyed the bedroom, noting each detail that grated upon her delicately tutored nerves. It was the room of a prostitute, or of a Negro girl suddenly exposed to money and adoration without the benefit of understanding. In it, she saw many raw emotions, from the tufted, unmatched pillows to the multitude of erratically shaped perfume bottles on the overburdened dresser. She looked at Belle, now brash and confident, but she remembered how, only a few moments ago, the mulatto girl had shuffled from the dining room, abashed by unspoken accusations, completely at the mercy of an ex-slaver and his blunt assumptions. At the same instant, Elena hated, suffered, understood and feared the fate cultivated by the pretty brown girl who was obviously a woman.

"I must not stay long, Belle Merver," she finally said. "But it is important that I say certain things, distressing things to a girl of your background, but important if you are to survive the terrors to which I'm sure you will be subjected! May I speak?"

"Yes'm," Belle replied in some awe of her guest's intensity.

"Thank you. Silas King is the son of a man spawned in Hell. Jacob King was the foulest man ever to draw breath, but he was a man few others dared challenge, physically or mentally. You hear what seem to be idle words about King-Alvarez. King-Alvarez was Jacob King and Don Alvarez. Today, it is one of the richest, most ruthless trading companies on the Spanish Main. Its wealth is due to the mind of Don Alvarez, but originally, it was begun by the consummate beast who was Jacob King. He was a slaver, with no other aim in life but to decimate the jungles of Africa in favor of the slave pits and barracoons of Cuba! Despite his love of the sea and his devotion to danger, he did this for

Spanish gold. Listen to me, Belle Merver! He did not hate Negroes! I doubt that he ever once opened his mouth in defamation of a black man or woman. He simply did not think about them as people, yet he was a nigger lover, if one ever lived! You are now consorting with his son, who avows a different creed, and seeks to prove it by his affection for you. He fools no one, especially those who know his heritage!

'I can not recite for you the hundreds of occasions when Silas bled inwardly for the abuses his father showered upon the slaves owned by King-Alvarez. Silas has at least two score half-brothers and sisters who are the same color as you are. Jacob killed Negroes with gun and whip and occasionally with a saber, and at the same time, he loved, physically, every black wench who caught his evil eye! I remark this purposefully, Belle.

'I have known good men and bad, identified largely by what drivels escaped their lips. Today, you are enamoured of a man who proclaims love and exalted intentions toward you. On the surface, he is kind and considerate, while he performs precisely the same gymnastics his father performed from seemingly different motives! Where can you go, what can you count upon? If tomorrow, Silas King decides to chance the morality of a Spanish court, what must happen to you? At best, you can be nothing more than an example of his liberalism, to be displayed before dignitaries who have grown rich refuting any possibility that a Negro could be a child of God! Regardless of Silas' apparent empathy toward you, and all Negroes, he is well aware of your lack of education, breeding and background. Nor can he ignore his own, which insists that wherever he goes and with whomever he associates, he must live up to the name of Silas King de Acquilantos!

'Oh, he will pay you well and make certain moves to see that you are cared for, but you will suffer the same casting off as his father designated to his bed wenches, ten years ago!

Nearly breathless, Elena stopped to see how her words were affecting Belle. What she had blurted had long been buried in her consciousness and the exertion of expressing her soul had left her nearly weak. The slow smile that appeared on Belle's face finished her enthusiasm entirely. The mulatto girl curled into a provocative shape and smiled broadly.

'I right. You like me, some nigger, some white,' she said. 'Only thing, you done fo'got how to be a proper nigger, I think. Silas ain't goin' leave me for no Spanish court. He go, I go, 'cause he can't do without me, an' I goin' to see he never can! Anyhow, his

papa gone, an' that was in Cuba! This is Boston, an' things is different. You better go, an' git done what it is you got to do. When you an' that ol' Alvarez is gone, we be the same as before. Maybe I ain't go no eddy-cation, and was made on a straw stack, but I know about men folks, an' Silas is sho one of those!

Elena knew she was beaten and suddenly, she didn't care what happened to the arrogant mulatto. She drew her sparkling *rebosa* close and opened the hall door. For a moment, she remembered the endless times Don Alvarez, and her father, had explained to her the ineffectual nature of colored intellect, and she almost believed them. She managed a falsely sympathetic smile, then left Belle to her own imagined security.

Returning to the lower floor, she knew better than to intrude upon the two men in the front parlor.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They sipped at cooling cups, Silas choosing coffee, Don Alvarez deciding upon tea which he privately felt was more civilized than the more robust brew. They had come to a moment of silence, because Don Alvarez had made a strong point and Silas was young. Peace was insured because Don Alvarez had wisely confined his remarks to what interested him, the failure of his ward to recognize his weakness in virtually abandoning the New England Anti-Slavery Society, regardless of the Spaniard's beliefs that the Society was hardly more than a collection of misguided fanatics. He had not spoken a word of condemnation for anti-slavery concepts.

'It may appear to you, Silas, that I make mountains out of molehills in proverbial foolishness, but I assure you that such is not the case. Recall that I have lived a long time, twenty-one years with a King at my side. From the throne of old age - I am nearly sixty - I am privileged to decide what makes a man and what makes a fool. Oddly, politics has little to do with it, Silas. Every man is entitled to his opinions. Ours differ and this is as it should be. I remark this because it is more important that I adhere to my responsibilities as *papacita* than it is that I convert you to my brand of politics. I am pro-slavery, politically, but first I am Don

Alvarez, of King-Alvarez. Do you understand?"

"I think so. Although I am unduly harassed by your infernal repetition of the fact!" Silas replied. "To facts, however. You are concerned because I have declared and exploited an affection for a colored woman, and in so doing, have apparently voided my faith in the New England Anti-Slavery Society, a cardinal sin in the scale of your personal appreciations. On the face of it, Don Alvarez, I do not follow your logic. Not another member of the Society has ever openly expressed a single degree of fondness for the blacks they purport to champion. This I know for a fact."

Alvarez considered this for a few seconds before he retaliated. "Now who repeats?" he mused. "This, I suppose, in left-handed statement of the disappointment you have expressed for the motives behind the New England anti-slavery groups?"

"Perhaps. Lately I have been concerned with a more positive manner of approach - a more responsive attack upon the citadel of slave holding."

Alvarez smiled. "You could declare war on the Spanish."

"I could also renounce my heritage and abandon King-Alvarez!"

"I think," Alvarez said dryly, " - you need the King-Alvarez Gold!"

"Why may I not stay angry at you, *papacita*?" Silas asked.

"Probably because I have never been completely antagonistic to a King," Alvarez said with a chuckle. "You know, I loved your father as I would have loved my brother."

"Nothing to the credit of your moral structure, I'm sure. Were you of my convictions, possessing your knowledge of the slave trade, where would you choose to attack the evil, *papacita*?"

Abruptly, Don Alvarez was more serious than before. It did not matter to him that he had been asked to solve an enigma that if solved, would impoverish King-Alvarez. It did not seem to matter that he had been asked to desert his convictions, indeed, his very way of life. He looked at his intensely watching ward with hard but understanding eyes.

"Not in Boston, Silas. As you have stated, Boston is developing a huge anti-slavery force but only because, one step past the theocratic front, the concern is largely economic. I can vouch for this by reciting the often peculiar wording that is penned upon purchase orders from New England. Many refuse to buy sugar and coffee which has been loaded or warehoused by slaves. As yet, no merchant has been foolish enough to demand that Cuban produce be entirely untainted by a slave's hands, but it may come. In the meantime, most of New England is content to soothe its

conscience by prohibiting the loading and warehousing of merchandise by slaves.'

Silas chuckled.

'I know, Silas. But you laugh only because you were born and raised on a slave holding plantation and understand the folly of such requests. Why that inherited wisdom does not extend to the total principal of slavery, I do not understand. Could it be my best friend sired a total idiot?'

They laughed, abruptly returned to an affinity that went nearly twenty years into the past. Suddenly, Alvarez leaned forward. His index finger poked forcibly to his ward's chest.

'Go to Africa, Silas. That is where the entire concept of a black man's servitude to a controlling master began. You live in an enlightened generation, with its morality based largely upon legend and untruths. No white man ever took a black slave until the system had been perfected by other black men. In the days when I was active along the Windward Coast, under the shelter of the African mangroves, almost every jungle trader who broached the King-Alvarez factory wore the fez of a Mohammedan; all wore the black skin of a Negro. In the beginning, they cheated us regularly, at least until we learned as much about the worth of a nigger slave as they had long known. Silas, it was a black man who taught us how to buy and sell a nigger, how to keep him well and breed his women. Go to Africa, where what you call an evil was first perfected. *Madre de Dios*, what have I said?'

'*Adios to the Grenita*,' Silas answered quietly. 'I shall require her for passage to the Windward Coast!'

Which decision seemed not to perturb Don Alvarez in the least. He leaned back in his chair and smiled proudly at his ward, seemingly just grown up to be a King.

It was not quite as simple as merely making a decision. Don Alvarez supervised the preparation of the *Grenita*, even to the extent of assuring Captain Emanuel Nello there was no choice but to accede to Silas' whims. Putting the *Grenita* into order in the face of a four thousand sea-mile voyage and return was merely a mechanical matter, involving provisions, and filling out a crew willing to chance the African coast. In defense of his own bent for business, Don Alvarez set about locating twenty-five tons of trade goods, justified to Silas as a requisite to find welcome on the Windward Coast.

Silas did not challenge Don Alvarez' penchant for detail nor his knowledge of Africa. Nor his strangely pleasant willingness

to send his ward off on a journey calculated to thwart his livelihood. In keeping with his hours of lecturing about the necessity of a man standing solidly behind his basic principles, Don Alvarez spared no effort to further what he privately believed to be a most nonsensical adventure. He worked diligently, reminding all who questioned his endeavor that Silas was a King, and that what King-Alvarez chose to do was the paramount consideration, not the nature of contributory problems.

It became evident very soon that Silas possessed more power than wisdom. For the first time in his nearly adult life, he had made a decision that involved a number of people not inspired by his kind of emotionalism. His Boston friends refused to subscribe to his enthusiasm for the possibilities of Africa; slavery to them was nearly a local problem, a corruption seeping north from the established evils in the south. They were incapable of relating slavery to the long distant shores of Africa, or to the primitive fundamentals of an alien culture. Following each heated discussion, Silas found himself more alone than ever, a fact which perversely convinced him that in his hands alone lay the salvation of the black man.

Belle did not question his voluble arguments; if he were ignorant of the conditions in Africa, she did not even know where Africa was. When he suggested that they begin their efforts in the land of her forefathers, she looked at him blankly, having not the faintest idea of what a forefather was nor where her ancestors had originated. This mental void Silas scored against the social structure that dipped a Negro in total ignorance and grew rich on the maintenance of that ignorance.

With both hands filled with the sensate flesh of her magnificent torso and his mind in a state of total surrender, he put fiery lips to her high abdomen and succumbed to youthful vigor.

'It does not matter, my love. That you understand nothing of your beginnings only adds powerful justification to what I have planned. In a matter of weeks - days, if the *Grenita* is as swift as Alvarez insists she is - you will shortly find answers to all of the mysteries that have plagued you for the years you have lived!'

'Sho, man,' she giggled and then destroyed him with a flood of passion he was incapable of evaluating.

During these days of preparation, stretching now, deep into a second week, Elena maintained a degree of silence and circumspection broken only in the privacy of her own bedchamber. Since the obvious failure with Belle Merver, she had weighed her own position and found it overburdened with uselessness. Much

of this decision was due to the disrupted pattern of her life; nine years the Señora King, eight and a half as the widow of Havana's most successful slaver, she had developed certain compensations for certain shortcomings, and though she felt strongly about her stepson, she felt more acutely the needs and desires of her own life.

She hated slavery because as a white Negro, slavery had been a threat to her security for over thirty-five years. She tolerated Don Alvarez del Prado because some weakness in her character needed someone to fear. This mystic failure was joined by the fact that he knew she was not purely white, and he had long ago learned of her uncontrollable moments of need. Life had never been easy for Elena, and even now, rich and respected and on the surface, forgiven for the deceit her priestly father had foisted upon Jacob King, she suffered many peculiar pains not necessarily dependant upon her tainted blood.

Elena had no real understanding of why Don Alvarez had demanded that she accompany him on this unreasonable visit to Boston. In the elapsed period of their visit, he had again proved that he was not a man who needed assistance nor support. Elena had no sound understanding of his purposes, but she had remained silent and docile while Don Alvarez had shaped his ends to suit his intentions.

There had been time for Elena to weigh many things, life in Boston, the New England austerity of the house and kitchens, the delightful ferocity of Silas' house servants, and the elegance of America without the petty frivolities of Spanish grandeur. She had tried diligently to occupy herself with small things, reciting, to her constant impatience, a list of compensations in which she had no real faith. Now, five days before the proposed date of her stepson's departure, to be followed immediately by her own return to Cuba in company with Don Alvarez, Elena succumbed to what she thought was irrefutable evidence of her knowledge of the King mind, which when cleverly submitted to Belle Merver could not help but prove what her first conversation to the pretty mulatto girl had failed to establish.

Not once did Elena examine the contributory factors to her determination. She conveniently forgot that she had, in past years, toyed vicariously with the immature sexual potentials of Silas King, not because she was enamoured with the spindly youth, but because innate lewdness, cultivated in defense of her impure blood, had become a private answer to her enforced loneliness. She ignored the fact that sexual misadventure had become

her one refuge from deadly ennui. She did not count the fact that in the Acorn Street house, her bedchamber was only three doors from that of her stepson, and that though the walls were sound-proof in testimony to the skill of Boston carpenters, no similar protection existed to quiet her mind when Belle Merver nightly broached her stepson's private quarters.

In seeming devotion to Silas and his future, Elena simply decided that it was essential that she prove to Belle that Silas was little more than a nigger lover, like his murdered father had been, and Elena accepted the personal challenge with nervous eagerness. It was not her fault that she was the only other female with black blood in her veins and a degree of accessibility. The lesson, she philosophized, was more important than the details.

There was nothing childish nor particularly obscene about her contemplations once the concept was accepted by her. It would require two physical conditions. Don Alvarez would have to be out of the house, busy elsewhere with the last minute preparations before the *Grenita* put to sea. The second requirement was an opportunity for her to approach Silas under circumstances he would be forced to accept. The first condition seemed almost inevitable, considering Don Alvarez' lately acquired schedules. The second occupied Elena for several hours, largely because even thinking out the details excited her tremendously. A compelling detail was figuring out how Belle could be placed for best observation of the seduction. For the first time in her life, Elena prepared to cast caution to the winds and hurl herself into unbridled passion with a witness who could testify to her wantonness.

As the date of sailing, now only three days away, neared, several things happened to Silas. Finality had been established by his negotiations with the owner of the rented Acorn Street dwelling, and the serious, nearly tearful dismissal of Minnie Kelly and Tom Cleveland. The previous day had carried a note of certainty about it because the offices of the Revenue Marine had sent a young but somewhat recently experienced naval officer around, bearing the latest charts of the west coast of Africa, and certain personal observations about nautical hazards in the shallows of the coastal areas. Don Alvarez had been present then, and had reduced Silas' concern by making certain notes to be hand-delivered to Captain Nello, the next day.

Silas wished his *papacita* had not been required to attend certain shipboard duties this night, because as the critical date grew

closer, Silas had moments of misgiving. None of these concerned the *Grenita*, her captain nor her crew, nor the contingencies of the impending voyage. He was packed and so was Belle, and the Boston house and its accoutrements were properly accounted for. His nervousness was purely personal. For the first time since he had decided to take his campaign to Africa, Silas doubted himself.

Now he sat, surveying the many pages of notes penned since supper. The four candles in the candelabra flickered from casual drafts; the household, including Belle, had retired and left him to the self-imposed task of aligning his thoughts. The sentences scrawled in Spanish across the pages were not reminders. Silas had spent many hours reciting to himself the number of physical things that had to be done once Africa was reached. In the main, the sentences were brief statements, nearly political in nature because they dealt with anti-slavery argument rather than specific items to be accomplished. They were notes he might have penned prior to an anti-slavery rally in the GAZETTE anterooms, or a meeting in Fanueil Hall; they seemed completely juvenile to Silas and they bore no relationship to the Africa Don Alvarez had described in remarkable detail.

When Silas tested their sterility with the violent, if nostalgic, impressions Alvarez had recited, his feeling of inadequacy thickened. It was one thing to have monstrous faith in what his friends termed 'spiritual sympathy', it was another thing to bring his apparently bland philosophies to the admittedly barbaric blacks who doted upon rum, slaver's gold, and a primitive sense of power. He blasted the feeling of inadequacy with youthful enthusiasm; he clung to the certainty that once the African bushman understood the hell he cultivated by practicing slavery among his brethren, he would logically subscribe to a proper hatred of slavery.

If many of his arguments and denouements were based upon concepts lately come by from the lips of his abolitionist comrades, they did not overshadow his own memories of blood and death and sweating black bodies. And faces drawn with terror and pain and a degree of helplessness too hideous to describe. Not a few of his enthusiasms were founded upon a private vanity born of his success with Belle. To Silas, she was a classic example of what a slave could become if given an honest chance.

Thinking these things, he was not surprised when a soft caressing voice at his shoulder said, 'Poor Silas! It is nearly midnight.'

His surprise came when he turned and instead of Belle, the

figure shrouded in an elegant Spanish *bata* turned out to be Elena. During the past two weeks he had seen little of her and spoken to her less than a dozen times. Seeing her now, in the loneliness of a late hour in an apparently deserted house, he cringed slightly as his mind was harassed by boyhood memories that never quite crystallized, then he came to his feet in immediate respect for his stepmother.

'I had not meant to awaken you, Señora,' he said humbly.

'Oh, you didn't awaken me, Silas. I had not been sleeping. I was - well, you may not understand, but I was, and am, perturbed by the thought of you departing for a land so far away, and so unfriendly to your beliefs! Ah, Silas, we have been so far apart when we should have been so close!'

Her slim hand on his arm was oddly disturbing. He looked down at the possessive fingers, unjeweled and totally manicured. Being male, he could not ignore the exquisitely garbed sensuality of his stepmother, as his nose could not avoid the compelling fragrance of her Spanish perfume. These physical prods sent his mind back and back, to childish memories he no longer believed were valid. But valid or not, the memories persisted. He extended an ink-stained hand and proffered her a seat in a deeply leathered chair. She ignored his offer and twisted to seat herself in the stiff-backed oaken chair he had been sitting in.

'No,' she said, smiling slightly. 'I will not be frustrated! You have worked long enough. I intend that you quit now, and retire! Tomorrow is another day, Silas.'

'But there is much to be done and I sail in three days!'

Her sigh was physically beautiful and volubly sad. 'I know, dear man, and am considerably disturbed by the certainty of your departure. Will you miss me at all, Silas?'

The words seemed harmless enough. It was their tone, or lack of tone, that alerted Silas' instincts. He stared at her, his eyes meeting hers, his mind buffeted by thoughts he felt properly ashamed of. It seemed to him that in a few seconds Elena had somehow eradicated their true relationship and become at once a stranger who was remarkably familiar. That familiarity disturbed him; looking down at her, he did not remember that she was his stepmother, he remembered only that she was the woman his father had married. The third woman. Begun, he could not stop his mind, and the memories so recently discredited seemed persistent in their ugliness.

He reached out and picked up the steel quill with which he had been writing. The nib was black but dry. He tossed the pen to the

table top and watched it spin until it lost momentum, the ungentle point aimed directly at Elena. He looked at her, and for a moment, the urge to thrust his hand down the neck of her night robe was almost irresistible, not because he needed to feel of a woman's bare breast, not because his young body demanded sexual relief, but because Elena King de Sandini suddenly seemed demandingly available. He licked his abruptly dry lips and tried to smile. Elena, devastatingly serious, reached out and took the hand that had flipped the pen. Without a word, nor a preliminary warning, she pulled it to her and tucked it down the neck of her night robe. Farther down than was required to be provocative.

For a moment, Silas was without breath, then he deliberately curled his fingers around the full softness of his stepmother's right breast, and his palm burned with the hot, hard pressure of the pulsing nipple. He opened his mouth, then closed it as his voice refused to come. Without hesitation nor remorse, he sent his other hand to Elena's shoulders, pulling her into his illicit grip. Her head folded down, her firm full lips pressed delightedly to his hairy forearm.

Belle went through almost every emotion she was capable of knowing. Mirth at first, then confidence, and then to doubt and now to anger and jealousy. By her standards, Silas was her man. By the white man's standards, Elena was his stepmother, barely removed from the critical status of being his mother by a fluke of time and a geographic discrepancy. Silas she only hated because the tawny body he sought to claim was not hers; hate and rage melted into an emotion Belle was not able to name then, because despite her early initiation into the delights of sexual congress, she had never before seen a man and woman 'Doin' it'.

She stood stiffly, her taut back pressed to the wall of the book niche, barely a dozen feet from the vigorously enamoured pair. It was all there, the strain of urging tendons, the smack of perspiration moist flesh, the subtle odor of lust. Belle stared, time racing first, then standing still. Her body wept, first from loneliness, then from inadvertently poignant lust, and she was forced to blink rapidly to clarify her fiery vision.

When it was over, she stared at the ungraceful culmination. They hugged briefly and he kissed her once. Belle could not hear their murmured words, but she was able to decide that however it had been accomplished, her man did not seem at all exuberant nor happy. He was instead, terribly serious and somehow distant. Once more, Belle traversed the scale of emotions and when she

came back to mirth, it was cruel mirth, properly frilled by confidence.

To herself, she reiterated the certainty that Elena King de Sandini was a near to white nigger girl, that Silas was male enough to be interested in a good looking bit of loose pussy, and that she, Belle Merver, still retained the bulk of his affections. Contented and certain that Elena had proved nothing, Belle slid sideways and moved to the hall stairs. Her smile developed into a chuckle as she climbed to the second floor.

She'd have fun, she decided, teasing her man about a limp cod when the time came later to cultivate sleep with their own kind of exhaustion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Despite his tendency to avoid notoriety during the nearly three week period of preparation, a large crowd was on hand to witness the departure of the *Grenita*. The shipping master of The Turco Companies remembered the exorbitant fees paid by Don Alvarez del Prado and forgave the ten o'clock disturbance of the normal day's work. In any case, nearly half the crowd shared the Turco attitude toward abolitionism, and Turco management had decided that no anti-slavery brig should put to sea without proper representation of the opposition.

Silas, no sailor, stood at the polished rail, waving slow and dignified goodbye to faces he recognized as friendly. He was agreeably surprised to see men and women he had thought were ex-friends and he was nearly moved to tears when the out-of-tune but enthusiastic band from the Brookline Methodist Church broke into blasting over 'Greenland's Icy Mountains', a favorite song of the abolitionist forces. Groups of long-faced ladies stood demurely waving tear-damp handkerchiefs as the *Grenita* moved away from the wharf under gentle pressure from her jibs and half furled spanker. Their long dark dresses were symbolic of their mien; Silas knew that these austere clad ladies represented vast segments of anti-slavery power because they were the wives of prominent and often powerful merchants who kept life-blood pulsating through Boston's marts.

When a particular group came into view, he waxed into vigorous salute. Somehow, he had not expected the Tappan brothers, Lewis and Arthur, to attend his departure. He was surprised and pleased to see John Quincy Adams' personal secretary, standing between Newton Pierce and Reverend Amos Stanton. There were faces he did not recognize, but because of dignity and hirsute adornment, he suspected were a few of the literary force that populated the 'out-of-town' ranks of abolitionism.

Feeling like Marco Polo, he even smiled condescendingly to the large clusters of pro-slavery people, who had gathered to hurl invective and a few stones at the slowly moving brig. He was somewhat surprised by their nominal pacivity, not realizing that to them, his proposed venture into missionary work in the wilds of Africa smacked of lunacy and a prime waste of energy.

On board, the *Grenita's* crew was totally occupied with the physical requirements of making sail and threading the brig through Boston harbor's complicated and disorganized anchorages. Time and again, the brig nearly rubbed bulwarks with anchored schooners, brigantines and bulky cargo vessels. Shallow drafted, she was able to avoid certain areas reserved for the deeper drafted freighters and heavily gunned men-of-war. At the helm, Captain Emanuel Nello handled the wheel with pride and skill, all the while snapping brisk orders to his watch officer who in turn, relayed the orders to seamen. By unspoken understanding, Belle Merver remained below decks, in the staterooms reserved for the owner. There was much for her to do because her luggage and Silas' seemed beyond the capabilities of the built-in lockers.

Once free of the wharf and through the congested anchorages, Silas turned his back to the sea and occupied himself with observing the mechanics of putting a brig under weigh. He was not very interested in these mechanics. Never a seaman, he had learned his nautical lessons as a passenger, first to Spain, then later through the Mediterranean, and finally, on the long passage to Boston. Unconsciously, he had fought seamanship as a refutation of his father, by legend, one of the most adept seamen of any generation. It somehow pleased Silas to establish indifference to the realm of his father, almost as if in refusing to acknowledge the sea, he was refusing to subscribe to Jacob King's unutterable philosophies.

Presently, he moved to Captain Nello's side, swaying with the heave and list of the tacking brig. 'All seems well, captain?'

'Aye-aye, Mister King. We are approximating nine knots, rather an excellent seaway for our course.'

'And you know the *Grenita* well,' Silas felt disposed to add.

'She is a fine brig and responds to a delicate hand.'

'This list will be present for the bulk of the voyage?'

'A penalty of the course and the season, Mister King.'

'Of course. All can not be perfect when the voyage is predetermined, I'm sure. You estimate twenty-eight days to the mouth of the Bensanee River?'

'A day or so either way, depending upon the steadiness of the trades. Is there anchorage there?'

'I was told there was,' Silas replied.

Captain Nello nodded, then turned to the alert watch officer. 'Dead west. Mister Olgivlie, until we reach the 70th meridian, then edge south two degrees.'

'Aye-aye, sir,' the second officer agreed and took the helm.

Remembering numbers, west by south 92 degrees, because he had lived among traitors and liars for many months, Silas went below, his mind suddenly concerned with how Belle was finding her sealegs.

He did not go directly to the trio of cabins that represented the owner's staterooms but moved down the companionway to the main salon. Sounds came from the galley and the tread of feet sounded overhead as the crew moved about necessary tasks. The walnut paneled salon was deserted, and with no warning, Silas felt the loneliness concentrate behind his vision with nearly irresistible force. Near to unmanly tears, he sat down, very much alone.

He had not expected Don Alvarez nor his stepmother at the hour of sailing because they were boarding a coastal trader, even now, for the voyage back to Havana. They had had final breakfast together at the Acorn Street house, evading the pain of good-byes with joviality, forced perhaps, but externally genuine. To Silas, the days required for preparation seemed brief as minutes. He could hardly believe that he sat now, alone in the bowels of a speeding brig on its way to the coast of Africa. By rights, he knew, he should have been jubilant and full of confidence, but he felt sad and painfully unsure of himself.

He could not disperse a peculiar feeling of having been manipulated. Reciting the many and often repeated enthusiasms and subtle lectures about a man needing to be steadfast in his endeavors, Silas suddenly remembered that Don Alvarez was indeed, half of King-Alvarez, a mighty company that dealt in sugar, coffee - and slaves, and that if one applied Don Alvarez' tenets to his own responsibilities, or at least, those he voiced, his

willingness to help Silas into Africa could be suspected with honest doubts.

In more sinister contemplation, Silas tried to understand the real reason for Elena's maternal aberrations in his arms. Here, the pleasure of her body mingled with the need to find an answer and he did not think very clearly. Baffled by his inability to separate fact from supposition, he rose and moved to the door leading into his quarters. Before thumbing the brass catch, he put his forehead to the stout paneling and listened. From inside, the sounds were soft and unhurried. He entered.

The cabin, lying slightly aft of the bilge extreme, was spacious and richly furnished. Originally, it had been intended as a place of luxurious privacy for Jacob King. It contained a chart table, upholstered settees and countless lockers. The deck was of parquetted teak squares laid over the *Grenita's* longitudinal planking. The portholes and skylight framing opening through the low deckhouse were of meticulously polished brass. Now the cabin space was cramped by unopened trunks and travel bags. The soft sounds came through a partially open door, opening into a companionway that passed a portside head before it opened into another cabin dedicated to tiered bunks and drawered lockers for intimate clothing. Steadying himself with hands to the bulkheads, Silas moved down the narrow companionway.

Without realizing it, habit and novelty consumed him. Belle sat, gorgeously attired in hardly more than a French corset and a lacy bodice. She was doubly devastating because the beveled mirror of the built-in dressing table reflected her high chest, the flawless round of her throat and the exquisite thrust of her full breasts. The brown and silken texture of her tawny flesh was as much of an aphrodisiac as was her gaze, meeting his in the purity of the perfect mirror. Her fingers let settle the small objects she was putting away in the dressing table drawers.

'It tips,' she said, pressing with mock annoyance on the high end of the dressing table.

'It is called 'list' and it will change as the course is maintained - for nearly a month, dear heart,' he laughed.

She turned then, correcting the relaxed curve of her back as she slid her hose-sheathed legs around in dark brown symmetry. Sight of her, in exotic profile, half naked amid the confusion of settling in, tore viciously at Silas' uncertainties. She smiled as he approached her unsteadily because of the deck angle. His hand came out, gropingly, hers moved to fit itself to his ribcage with strong familiarity. They kissed as they had done a thousand times

before, but the taste of her full mouth made his head spin as it had not whirled for many days.

'Oh, Belle!' he breathed against her teeth.

'Now, man?' she murmured. 'Them doors -'

'No one would dare enter these staterooms without knocking, darling. Your dress -'

Belle stood up through his hands, somehow managing to keep his kiss in contact with her body as she turned and flipped her dark wool dress from the lower bunk. She turned again and sat down on the bunk, deliberately deforming her under-thighs against the down-scalloped riser that secured the plump mattress in place.

Methodically, but with small intimacies added, she began to remove his clothing. Her fingers were as tender as a bride's but as adept as a harlot's, and Silas forgot that the next dry land he was scheduled to touch was to be the coast of distant Africa.

Not until the fourth day at sea was nearly ended did Silas begin to understand the magnitude of his adventure. The sea, accepted as calm by the *Grenita's* officers, seemed an endless series of mountainous waves over which the brig plunged and lifted with no seeming forward progress. The sky was monotonously blue, broken only by banks of clouds that seemed bent upon hurrying somewhere behind them. They seemed painfully alone because the few ships that had occasionally hailed them the first day out of Boston were now so thoroughly salted over the face of the Atlantic they seemed not to exist. Sails that were sighted were always too far in the distance for any degree of friendship to be passed.

With nothing else to do, Silas spent much time at the helm, making acquaintance with the watch officers and their quartermasters. No linguist, he could exchange but a few words with First Officer Joseph Leguire, a Frenchman of huge shoulders and squinty eyes. Second Officer Olgivlie was an Englishman and accessible. He was also an inveterate story-teller; a liar by Silas' private opinion, but they got along marvelously. The Third Mate was a Portuguese who constantly lamented the structural deficiencies of the *Grenita*. She had, in his eye, been built for the slave trade and he scoffed laughingly at the deckhouse and the degree of luxury expressed by varnished teak and polished brass. Silas suspected that the loose mouthed Third Officer secretly hoped there might be some occasion to use the neatly paired swivel guns mounted forward on the accursed deck-house. Never-the-less, he enjoyed Doni Mermenti and privately agreed with Captain

Nello that the blasphemous Portuguese was a consummate seaman.

His favorite shipboard companion was Doctor Merriweather, the brig's physician. He was a stolid New Englander, with steel-rimmed glasses and a placid nature, aroused only when the subject of slavery was approached. He was an abolitionist who based his anti-slavery ferocity only upon the despicable manner used to transport slaves. He had witnessed the holds of several slavers, and had consistently failed to cure the products of their evil. Like any other physician of his time, he lacked the means to treat many infectious diseases; he spoke as often about the weaknesses of his profession as about the virulence of African diseases. He openly confessed great personal pique that he had not followed the quavery fields of research instead of the mundane and relatively helpless areas of a general practitioner.

It seemed to Silas that Doctor Merriweather was the busiest man aboard the brig. He was constantly supplying powders and potions to the officers and crew, with more constant scoldings about ignoring what seemed to be a moderate malady. He also studied a great deal, having brought aboard as much dunnage in text books as he had in clothing. On every occasion, his first words to Silas after casual greeting were, 'How is your health today, Mister King?'

Silas felt a bit guilty that he never felt ill, nor was he subject to more than mild headiness in the worst of seas.

Gradually, because of loneliness and a dislike of confinement to the staterooms, Belle became more and more addicted to finding air on deck, generally against the rail forward of the helm.

This pleased Silas because he had not been left unaware of the crew's interest in the seldom seen mulatto kept by the young Mister King, ostensibly for his private pleasure. It displeased him slightly to observe the unmasked leers and open approval of the lithe figure poised against the rail. He forgave the seaman because he secretly shared their admiration of Belle, and because he was certain none were brave enough to attempt poaching on his personal reserves. He found a second small annoyance in the fact that Belle obviously preferred Third Officer Doni Mermenti above the more gentlemanly Olgivlie and the Frenchman, Leguire, but he discounted this preference when she warmed quickly to Doctor Merriweather. With the wry physician, she seemed constantly giggling, a merry sound aboard the sterile brig.

Eleven days at sea, with the North Atlantic half conquered, several small twinges Silas had felt during the past nearly two weeks consolidated. Unsure about details, he confided in Doctor

Merriweather. For some reason Silas could not analyze, it was easier to begin with the placidly natured physician than with Captain Nello.

He was surprised by Doctor Merriweather's blunt, 'Why?'

After a moment, Silas found an answer. 'Well, because I love her and she loves me, and because marriage is an honorable institution - her right in the face of what is ahead of us.'

'Are we friendly enough for me to speak my mind, Mister King?'

'I have spoken mine to you, doctor,' Silas reminded him.

The doctor spread his soft hand on the polished rail and stared over the rolling sea. It was a down-hill view due to a northerly tack, fragments of bow spray flicked them occasionally.

'You have often heard me express my hatred of slavery, Mister King, but you have never heard me express any love of the African. Nor for the French nor the English, nor any specific racial or nationalistic entity. My life has been spent trying to alleviate the physical problems of all men. I am inspired not by a man's race nor national heritage, but by his suffering in any language. I have perceived that you suffer in English and Spanish, regrettably beyond the meager powers of a physician. May I be forgiven if I remark that I do not think a cure lies in marrying a mulatto girl, particularly Miss Belle Merver. I'll explain that by also remarking that marrying her will add nothing to your life.'

'I do not understand that statement, doctor.'

'All right, I'll put it in plainer words. Captain Nello has the authority to wed you under Christian sanction. Ten seconds or ten minutes after the ceremony, what have you gained from the union?'

'Peace of mind.'

'Nonsense! If you are now disturbed, it is not by your relationship with Miss Merver. You are concerned, I think, by what you imagine other men are saying, about her and about yourself! At best, this is a thin excuse for marriage, and particularly to a woman who seems perfectly content with her present status.'

'We live in sin, doctor.'

'Whose definition of sin, Mister King? Yours or another man's? And to another man, which is most sinful, living unwed with a singularly beautiful Negro girl or marrying a mulatto who has obviously spent most of her life as a white man's slave?'

'You don't understand, doctor. Belle is a free woman.'

The physician patted Silas' shoulder. 'Consider what you have said, Silas King. If I do not understand, how can a stranger, un-

sympathetic to your anti-slavery concepts, possibly understand? And if you are capable of withstanding his censorship, is she? I think you'd risk more by marrying her than you possibly could by maintaining your present relationship!

'It is something I must do, Doctor Merriweather,' Silas said, abruptly sure of what he needed to do. 'I love her too much to deny her this honor and respect.'

Merriweather shrugged his thick shoulders and spat into the sea rushing by under the railing. It was not an intentional sign of disrespect, but Silas interpreted it in his own style and what had been a question about what he should do for Belle became a necessity.

Captain Emanuel Nello straightened up from his chart table and slowly turned to face Silas. His brow was furrowed, but not by the weirdness his ears had just heard. Like cut washers tumbling in a deburring barrel, thoughts rolled in his brain. It was true that on paper, Silas King owned the *Grenita*, and therefore owned her master. But Nello had taken orders from Don Alvarez del Prado for nearly ten years and controlled the brig and her destinies for an equal period of time. Pledged to the Windward Coast of Africa and any other segment of the world Silas chose to visit, he was still Don Alvarez' man, and the request, nearly a command, of Silas', directly crossed his interpretation of Don Alvarez' last remark.

'Protect Silas with your life, captain,' the aging Spaniard had said. 'He is young and prone to extremes, physically and mentally.'

Now Captain Nello gathered the courage required to do just as Don Alvarez had ordered.

'*Nunca, nunca, nunca, Señor King,*' he husked in Castilian. Finishing in English, he added, 'This I can never do, sir!'

'And why not, pray?' Silas demanded in cold fury.

Nello permitted himself the luxury of closing his eyes briefly before he replied. 'As master of this brig, I am privileged to make vital decisions. I will not marry you and Miss Merver while the *Grenita* is under my command!'

'As owner of the brig, I hereby relieve you of command, Mister Nello! Repair to your quarters, sir, and stand to be replaced the hour after this vessel anchors in the harbor of Las Palmas, the Canary Islands!'

That quickly, the issue became personal, no longer a matter of ship master and owner. Emanuel Nello had been prepared for argument; his summery dismissal was unexpected, and to his hot

Spanish blood, an insult. He still had presence of mind to note that the deadly cutlass about which he had been warned by Don Alvarez, was not belted to Silas King's slim waist. He further had presence of mind to conform to International Sea Law.

'I refuse to step out of command, believing that there is no one presently aboard the *Grenita* capable of acting as master until the Canarys are sighted,' he said, unable to hide the emotional rasp in his throat. 'I beg the sanctity of this chart room and ask you, señor, to remove your person that I may carry out my official tasks without harassment!'

'You refuse my dismissal?'

'Yes, señor. I respect my judgment, born of many years at sea, superiorly to yours. I am sorry, but I have no choice but to consider your wishes as devoid of a seaman's wisdom.'

He saw it coming, like action soaked in retarding molasses. Silas, nearly as tall as Nello but considerably lighter in build, twisted in rage and started a blow with his right fist, calculated to crush the adamant captain's jaw. It was barely half on its way when Captain Nello, strangely exulting in the chance for violence, knocked Silas senseless with the heavy brass sextant.

As the young man collapsed to the deck, Captain Nello crossed himself and stepped to the chart room door.

Gently, he called a sailor on watch, then stepped back, trying to imagine how he could explain this worrisome incident to Don Alvarez del Prado, if and when he ever reached Havana again. Abruptly bitter, he looked down at the unconscious Silas, noted the trickle of blood down the side of his face, and muttered, 'You dumb son-of-a-bitch!' which made him feel considerably better than before.

CHAPTER NINE

Doctor John Merriweather passed adept fingers over the bandage on Silas King's head, then stood perusing his patient and his work with a purse of doubt gathering his lips. The cut would heal cleanly and there was only a small lump signifying the contusion, but all was not well. By every law of medicine, Silas should have re-

covered consciousness some minutes ago. He lay now, quietly and in a deep coma.

Back of him to his left, Belle Merver stood, her tear streaked face gathered in spidery fingers. The steward's mate stood back of her, his face placid but his eyes revealing the mystery that shrouded the entire incident. He wore two weeks beard, an adornment that effectively masked most of his emotional responses.

'He goin' to be fine?' Belle asked.

'I'm sure of it. When he fell, he evidently landed harder than we'd thought. Or the sedative I've admimistered took more than normal effect. I'm sure he will regain consciousness and demand food within the half hour,' Merriweather observed. 'Now, he needs only rest and quiet. But he will be fine.'

'Sho funny cut from a fall,' Belle said.

'Captain Nello said that Mister King missed his footing and tumbled,' Merriweather said, reciting what had been told him by the brig's master. He didn't believe it either, but as the ship's physician, he had no authority to contradict the captain. His first cursory examination of the chart room had shown him nothing capable of cutting a skull so sharply; in his mind's eye, he saw something heavily metallic moving with some speed and force. He shrugged.

'Would you care for a powder that might relax your nerves?' Merriweather said to the mulatto girl.

'I fine,' she replied. 'If this ol' boat would just hol' still!'

'Yes. Well, I shall leave him to your care, Miss Merver. He'll be quiet and will rest for some time, I think. If he awakens, call me, please,' Doctor Merriweather folded his surgeon's kit and with a final look at Silas, bowed and left the stateroom. The steward's mate followed him into the salon, leaving Belle alone with the unconscious Silas. Alone, her expression changed instantly. Belle seemed to lose her agitation, and her face regained its normal placidity. Seemingly neither happy nor sad, she arranged the coverlet more precisely, then sat down on the settee adjacent to the dressing table.

To Belle, the 'accident' held more significance than a cut skull. It did not matter how nor where it had happened, her primitive logic termed it an omen, a signal warning that the entire voyage should be abandoned in the face of more serious threat. From the first moment at sea, she had longed for Boston. She had listened to a thousand arguments, a hundred assertions that Africa was to begin the death of slavery, an end to the degradation of her people.

In all of her life, Belle had not known that her people, the colored slaves and the few freedmen, were degraded in any way. She had listened to the laments and moanings of her mulatto friends and to the bitterness of her father, but to Belle, these had been normal dissatisfactions to which all people seemed subject. She had recognized a difference in her life between the commanding power of white men and the subservient responses of black men, but it had never occurred to her that this could and should be changed. To Belle, normally giggly and self-reliant, things were simply the way they were.

Now, as she looked at Silas, who had never once ceased to tell her how badly off the colored people were, she supposed nothing. She had no intention of broaching her desire to return to Boston. Her life was completely at the disposal of this lean man, and as a total, her life was not unpleasant. She hated the *Grenita*, but with remarkable logic, told herself that it would pass. Just as the cut would heal and there would be excellent food following the change of watch at eight bells. Eight bells, she had learned, was really four o'clock. Then she felt a little glow of extra warmth; if Silas did not regain consciousness by then, she would have dinner in the salon with Sam Olgivlie, the Second Officer, and the other jolly-mouthed members of his watch – without Silas to keep her from laughing at their rough dialogue, or maybe prevent her from flirting a little.

This probability was pleasant and it moved her mind to more specific matters – the way white men looked at her, the many occasions when she felt their hands and fingers brush the bulging places of her figure, and the peculiar knot that developed in her high abdomen when she was looked at a certain way. Sitting very still, she permitted her body to feel, beginning with memory and progressing to possibilities. Presently, her sensitiveness grew so violent she began to tremble. Getting up, she went to the state-room door and debated a visit to the deck where she could lean on the railing and feel the eyes of admirers. Belle had no idea of what an erogenous area was, but as her hand moved to the brass latch, she experienced many pleasant sensations, largely responses to the weirdly lustful thoughts that suddenly filled her mind. To cover her embarrassment, she giggled as she slipped into the companionway. Immediate need permitted her to forget that the man to whom she owed everything lay unconscious behind her. Silas King she placed neatly in a mental cubicle, and Belle Merver alone was real to her.

Sam Olgivlie was a good officer and an excellent seaman, but at the moment, he was hardly more than a frantic male. He was also very strong and he was using more of his body power than was required to press and cramp the mulatto girl into the paint locker. He could smell her and feel her warmth, and his powerful hands were filled with her lush flesh. He gripped her with two weeks of want in his muscles. A white woman would have screamed, a prostitute would have protested. Belle Merver merely struggled to offer her body at a reasonable angle.

'Ah, man!' she murmured as he crammed his abruptly naked hips between her straining thighs.

'Yah!' he exclaimed, inwardly laughing at the way he was poaching on Silas King's private preserves.

The short twilight of the open sea had nearly disappeared when Belle left the paint locker in the foc'sle and returned to the *Grenita's* deck. Olgivlie had left her, breathless, satiated and slightly afraid of what he had done. Before, it had seemed something he had to do. Belle had sensed his remorse as he had hurriedly dried himself and straightened his unpressed uniform trousers. He had hardly spoken a word to her, and she hadn't cared.

With no way of telling time, she had guessed at the thirty minutes he had told her to spend in the locker following his departure, and it had been less than fifteen minutes. In that time, she had used a nearly African method of ridding her organs of his lusty sperm, rearranged her light woolen skirt and made sure her hair was properly in place.

She thought about the Second Officer and she spent not a moment worrying about Silas. Belle did not have one iota of remorse and she did not think of what she had done as repayment for what she had seen Silas do with Elena King de Sandini. She undulated down the deck, pleased with how she felt, and how the seamen on watch looked at her. No black man had touched her in ten years, partially because she hated Negroes and partially because white men were always plentiful. If she preferred white men to black, it was not a matter of physical superiority, nor inferiority. Her private world was largely ruled by white men and Belle had long ago succumbed to the peculiar caste system that insisted she was a white man's darling. Dropping down the companionway into the salon, she giggled over a tiny memory of Sam Olgivlie's impatience.

Silas was still unconscious, and from the motionlessness of Doctor Merriweather, taking his pulse, the atrophy seemed con-

tagious. Belle stood, waiting for some comment and privately surveying the middle-aged doctor's broad back.

The stateroom smelled slightly of antiseptic, from Silas' bandaged cut, she assumed. It smelled fresh, standing high over the mild odor of her own armpits, raised to perspiration by her recent gymnastics. She waited until Doctor Merriweather folded up his stethoscope and turned away from his patient.

'Ah. Miss Merver. His pulse is strengthened but he seems enamoured with unconsciousness. Just as well. When he does awaken, the extra hours of undisturbed rest will serve him well.'

'He looks bad hurt,' Belle ventured. 'So still-like!'

'He evidently suffered some slight concussion. I'm sure no permanent damage has been done. You are not to worry.'

Belle giggled. 'Worry don't do no good,' she said.

'That's true. I just thought that because of your singular position aboard the *Grenita* you might be concerned about his possible hour of recovery.'

'Singular po-sition?' she echoed with an improper accent.

'Well, you are the only woman aboard the brig,' he said, a degree of strange softness in his voice.

Belle giggled again. 'Ain't nothin' I'd thought much about,' she told him. 'Ever'thin' on board responsible to him, doctor.'

Merriweather looked at her obliquely. 'It would seem so, Miss Merver, but I suspect that this is fundamentally only a theory. The fact is that all the men aboard, from the captain to the galley mate are men, individuals, who have their own welfare to look after and their own system of appraising life. This applies even to me, Miss Merver. And you, I imagine.'

It was not his words, which she hardly understood, but the strained tone of them that alerted her. They had moved from the bunk side to within a few inches of the companionway door. Back of them, Silas lay in a deep coma, a still figure amid the luxury of the stateroom. In front of them, the companionway led past the head and some wall lockers and into the main stateroom, now cleared of the trunks and bags and traveling paraphernalia. Momentarily, Belle felt the pressure of the doctor's closeness and she moved down the companionway, instantly aware the man was closer behind her than the restricted quarters demanded him to be. In the stateroom, she sat down on the settee and when he took his position close to her gowned leg, she knew he was not merely being solicitous. His bulk surprised her; she had not thought of the middle-aged doctor as a potential lover, nor even as a possibility. Now she looked up at his florid face and he was

only a man, a white man rapidly losing his professional composure. Belle giggled, abruptly understanding some things he had said.

'He goin' get well?' she asked.

'Later,' Doctor Merriweather replied in a hoarse whisper.

That kind of hoarseness she had heard before. It was strangely appealing, almost demanding. Her first thought was that he had no way of knowing about Sam Olgivlie and the paint locker. This then was just another example of her devastating appeal to white men. She leaned back and threw one breast in sharp outline. Nothing but vanity urged her to tease him further; she felt no fleshly demand, no yearning, no feminine need. She felt only personal pleasure that a man wanted her enough to risk his position as ship's doctor to seek her out under the temporarily closed eyes of Silas.

She made no attempt to resist the moment, nor to fight down the animal instincts his proximity inspired. As if in protest, she raised one hand, but there was nothing defensive in the way her fingers searched his trousers. Merriweather grunted and hunched his stout hips forward in crude satisfaction. He was remarkably quick when Belle pulled him down on the settee.

Sometime during the night, Silas regained consciousness. There was a well-trimmed lamp hanging in the cast brass bracket over the chart table. It furnished enough light for him to note the down-bulge of the upper bunk. Light bounced from the chronometer in the mahogany wall case so he could not determine the time. It did not matter because he wanted to think and be alone.

He instantly remembered how he had acquired the sore head and the small aches in his muscles. He had made a fool of himself and Captain Nello had decked him with some heavy metal object swung up from the chart table. He then remembered Doctor Merriweather's thinly disguised advice about marrying Belle. What had seemed at the time to be a logical rebuttal to the physician's practical if crude appraisal of the situation now seemed slightly childish. Belle slept above him now, and all he had to show for his Quixotic fervor was a very sore head and a great deal of chagrin.

Then he remembered that his quarrel with Captain Nello had not been over Belle, but over the captain's refusal to step down in deference to the owner's command. But he could not help recalling that the entire affair was due to his own idea of what was right and what was wrong. It mattered to Silas that he had virtu-

ally forced Captain Nello into an untenable position and that what had eventually occurred was his own fault. He even admitted to himself that he had been in the middle of attacking the captain with physical force.

He put his hand to the bandage on his skull, wincing a little at the large area of tenderness. He had no doubt that Doctor Merriweather had done the bandaging, and probably at the command of Captain Emanuel Nello. Being Silas and half-Spanish, he could not imagine that another Spaniard had told anyone the truth about the affair and he wondered what story the captain had concocted to explain the presence of the brig's owner lying senseless and bleeding on the chart room deck.

Presently, he forced himself to think about what had to be done about the fiasco. He stood as the owner of a luxurious vessel, defied and physically attacked by her master, hardly more than a hired hand by any measuring stick Silas understood. It did not matter that he had been right or wrong. He had been struck on the head and rendered unconscious by the man who drew his salary from his victim's purse. Silas squirmed over his own rhetoric. It seemed pompous and overly autocratic. The truth of it did not justify its despicable inferences. Tired more than he knew, he closed his eyes and let his fingers fold under his disheveled hair. In mental retreat, he wondered if it might be feasible to simply let the entire affair go unheralded. He tried to imagine the *Grenita* captained by some other master, and to his surprise, he discovered that subconsciously, he had been depending upon Nello, who was amid the few who had had any claim to Silas' boyhood affections.

Suddenly, from a half-sleep, Silas chuckled and the key character around whom his amusement centered was himself. He fell quickly silent, but Belle had not been disturbed. Presently, he went back to sleep, feeling somewhat better for having cleansed his mind of rancor. Through it all, he had been critically aware that the purpose of the voyage was a hundred times more important than petty differences between the captain and the brig's owner.

Doctor John Merriweather suffered his usual losing battle with indigestion, doctored himself with oil of peppermint, then took to the narrow bunk in his stateroom under the helm. He heard a snore or two through the plank bulkheads but his own concerns soon blended them with the creaking and rhythmic popping from the brig's timbers. He was not very sleepy.

From the beginning, he had not determined what the even-

tuality could be. He had watched Belle Merver, undulating the length of the *Grenita's* deck, he had often watched her laughing and fawning on Silas King's arm, and he had catalogued her in his mind as an overly endowed mulatto girl who possessed exaggerated capabilities common to most mulatto girls. His lust for her had been an abstract thing, largely because he had arrived at an age and portliness that almost forced lust to be an abstract thing.

He lay now, agreeably surprised at himself. Nigger girl or not, he thought he had conducted himself with admirable masculinity. His surprise was due, not to the fact that he had responded to her fingers, but to the degree of response. He remembered following Belle into the main cabin of the suite, and he remembered standing over her, perhaps too closely over her, but he had no distinct recollection of making any untoward moves nor saying any salacious thing.

As it stood, Belle Merver had chosen to lie with him of her own volition; left to his own devices he would have never dared to fornicate with his employer's wench. He smiled in male satisfaction over sharp memories. Then he frowned because he had moved to take the forward wench without once having determined the stability of her tongue nor the health of her exquisite sexual organ. He threw back the bunk coverlet and cursed the natural darkness. He flexed himself, and took some content from the placidity of his own reactions to stress. He was forced to settle for the dubious certainty that if she had diseased him, it was a circumstance he must necessarily share with Silas King.

Inadvertently, he began to think about the morrow. Silas would inevitably regain consciousness sometime during the night and by morning, he would be an active young man again. Activity in youth would mean, perforce, a lustiness ever present in young men. John Merriweather didn't really care. His late evening's adventure had satisfied him, mentally as well as physically. But equally, it had fired his vanity. He had soundly serviced a luscious female who, not three days before, had occupied his attention by being the subject of another man's desire to lift her from what seemed a sinful situation.

If Silas did not revive on the morrow, sufficiently to move about and assume his normal behavior, what then? Merriweather had some doubts that Belle would be content to sit by the bunk, holding Silas' hand and obliging his every wish for unnatural attention. She was, he now thought, a lively, energetic woman who needed movement and change to keep her pleased.

His mouth hardened in the darkness as he dreamed purely satisfactory dreams. He imagined Belle, enamoured of his capabilities, seeking him surreptitiously in selected privacies on the brig, disturbingly small and devoid of many niches suitable to clandestine gymnastics. At fifty-two, John Merriweather had been jousting by prostitutes and loose women in many ports and many illogical niches in those ports so he had little trouble, exciting himself with imaginary episodes involving Belle's agile body and insurmountable passions.

He had no sense of guilt, nor did he have a particle of remorse. It went without mental note that Belle Merver was a mulatto wench and Silas King maintained her as a toy, despite the Cuban's rather ridiculous desire to marry the colored girl. Merriweather had long ago crossed this desire off to Silas' youth, a condition in himself he had often smiled condescendingly at as part of becoming a middle-aged man. Now he thought about Silas merely as a man with a head wound, which delightfully rendered him impotent for an unknown number of days.

In the final moments before the brig's monotonous roll and pitch lulled the doctor to sleep, his mood returned to one totally dedicated to male vanity and sensual contentment. He virtually thought of himself as a man deliberately raped; he acknowledged no original intent to make love to Belle, and now that this had actually transpired, he excused himself as a man put upon, and in the same thought, added one more flaw to the character of the mulatto, and without knowing it, deepened his disrespect for the nature of Negroes.

CHAPTER TEN

Time was responsible for several factors affecting the maturity of Priene and Company's establishment on the Bensanee River. There were now three large barracoons instead of the original pair, and the number of warehouses and service huts had increased with the normal prosperity of ten years of trading. The anchorage had been considerably improved and enlarged as seasonal floods and droughts had worn off the rough edges of Jacob King's early constructions, and the steady come-and-go of slave ships, each

presenting a new but important problem had altered the primitive docking facilities as well as the depth and durability of the channel from the sea.

Prosperity, which had come with positive association with King-Alvarez Company, of Cuba, had left small traces. No casual observer could have charted the degree of wealth involved with Priene's enterprise. No excess paint had been brought from Conakry and repairs had been limited to those required to keep the slave factory intact. The buildings seemed worn and oppressed by the excessive heat and the tribulations of coastal Africa. Jungle vegetation had grown thickly over relatively unused areas, once made brushfree in the name of order and total design.

Much of the apparent desecration was due to the fact that Emile Priene, free of the incessant pressure exerted by Don Alvarez del Prado and his partner, Jacob King, had arbitrarily decided that certain continuing efforts were a waste of gold. Emile had grown immune to the sharp tongue of his Portuguese wife, Annella, assuaging his self-accusations of thriftiness with reflections upon how much gold it had taken to build their new house south of the factory and how much more gold Annella had spent refurbishing it to her suddenly elegant tastes.

There had also been, as was typical with slave factories, a considerable change among the supporting members of Priene's establishment. Profane Hinman, the astute and valuable chief clerk, had moved on, infected by the kind of restlessness which could not be denied. A handler or two had quit, three had died of fever, furnishing the factory on the Bensanee with a diminutive graveyard.

But these were minor changes, spread over a period of time that could not be related to the factory's success. A firmer clue to the prosperity of Priene and Company lay in the gradual acceptance of the factory by bush traders, from as far north as Timbukto and as deep into central Africa as the Nigerian hills. Being a trader at heart, Priene had sought the less exotic products of the caravan chiefs almost as avidly as he had sought their chains of slaves. He gave Spanish and Portuguese fine gold for hides, beeswax, ivory and livestock in fair measure. Fair measure still rendered fantastic profits, even as it welded friendship between the mongo and the Moslem bush chiefs who came to the Bensanee. In turn, his laden warehouses brought traders of every European vintage to his shore. After the profits were realized, Emile Priene went back to cultivating more; he had sickened and died of malignant fever only seven weeks before the *Grenita* broached the

mouth of the channel into the anchorage lagoon.

Captain Emanuel Nello had memorized the few sketches in coarse pencil made by Don Alvarez and subsequently furnished by Silas and he was now busy altering his mental impressions against the actualities of the shore. To his right, in one of the bolted down quarterdeck chairs brought up to accommodate Silas' unsteady legs, the brig's owner sat, contemplating the African coast with inner misgivings. The land lay like a rotting monster.

There was first the blue of the sea, clouded slightly by the affluent running from the still swollen tributaries of the short, sluggish Bensanee. There was then, the line of slow white surf, breaking lazily against the not white, not brown sand of the beach. Growing from countless spongy islands boasting the gray-brown sand were mangrove trees, none older than ten years, a few much younger and obviously struggling for life against the swamps lying over the alluvial islands. Back of the mangroves a full five or six hundred feet, the sharp ledge of dark green heralded the raw jungle, unchanged by time nor the encroachment of the white man.

Some broadleafed African trees towered above others, but the whole seemed impenetrable, forbidding. Silas knew from his own perusal of Don Alvarez' sketches, that Priene and Company occupied cleared areas behind the jungle edge. The original factory, edging the beach and the open sea, had been abandoned in favor of more facile quarters farther inland. He could see the lightly gabled roof of Emile Priene's house, red tile turned nearly black by a decade of African sun. It was south of the channel and situated in a private notch hacked out of the jungle line.

No longer weak nor quavery, Silas still liked the comfort of the quarterdeck chair. It seated him low, his face below the plane of vision that would have faced him with Captain Nello. If their quarrel had been allowed to fade into near forgetfulness, Silas was not yet up to reassuming his position as owner, and theoretically, total commander. He stared under the spinnaker boom, at the approaching channel and the fearsome jungle lying behind it. He was the first one to see the half dozen big Krooman canoes that descended from the anchorage to guide and assist the brig to a proper position. He only pointed, and was rewarded by a grunt of approval from Captain Nello.

Silas seemed uninterested in the sweating Kroomen, and he surveyed them as casual elements in a grotesque picture. Without realizing it, he was physically reacting to Alvarez' earlier and not

forgotten word about the character of the bush wooled Kroomen.

They were, Alvarez had assured him, a Negro of vastly different nature than the jungle bushmen. They were salt water blacks of no loyalty except to gold, with a fondness for 'dash', laughter and Spanish rum. They were essential to a slaver's existence because by heritage, they would take their long, sleek canoes into any water at any provocation. The slim, hand-hollowed tree trunks were both light and remarkably buoyant, and driven by the short broad paddles of the muscular Kroomen, would ride rollers, surf lines and frothing beach runs with equal ease. With hand woven lines and crude bulwark hooks, they assisted in bringing slavers to anchor. It was their canoes, manned by twenty shouting paddlers, that brought the shackled slaves from the island barracons to the slave ship's bulwarks so they could be lashed aboard, shaved, doused and crammed below deck into the stinking holds. In the same canoes, they brought leave weary sailors from the brothels and bistros sprouting from the festering jungle surrounding every slave factory. Kroomen, Alvarez had said, were a necessary link between the savagery of the bush and the finesse of the slave decks.

He had also passed considerable judgment upon their ability to be converted to an anti-slavery attitude, in that their very livelihood was based on a continued slave trade, and that theocratically, they worshipped only weird wooden carvings of seagods.

The Kroomen, not needed to warp the brig up the channel dropped back, and began loud, gleeful trade with the crewmen lined along the brig's rails. There was fruit of many kinds, yam wine, oddly shaped beads and small replicas of fish deities. The din was terrific, and in some way, more suitable to the fierce looking traders than would have been a degree of moderation. The *Grenita's* crew, sea weary and in need of variety, went half berserk trading pocket coins for objects they might never use, and for fruit and wine their palates did not understand.

The few seamen needed to mind the set of sails, called from the rigging, subduing their exuberance with some difficulty. The almost festive moment was contagious. Silas found himself grinning appreciatively and lent a twist of his shoulders to a seaman's efforts to catch something tossed by an enthusiastic Krooman.

From deep into the jungle ahead of them, three musket shots sounded and were answered by the bo'sun's mate in the forepeak. The signal shots had hardly faded away into the lush greenery before the *Grenita* was nosing into the lagoon that half bordered

the slave factory. Instantly, Silas beheld in new perspective, the ugliness of the Bensancee River establishment. It was his first view of a slave factory, and it shocked him deeply.

'Whooi!' Belle gasped, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

'The odor of slavery is not pleasant,' Silas reminded her. Having said it, he forgave himself the sterility of the remark by occupying his mind with huger problems. They stood at the starboard bulwark, awaiting the arrival of the scarred longboat that had put out from one of the sagging wharfs along the shore. Lining the beach between warehouses and sheds, a hundred blacks stood, chattering, gesticulating and pointing at the *Grenita*. Silas thought it likely that they had never seen such an elegant brig, so white and trim and polished beside the two slavers tied to the piers. This observation did not concern him greatly. What occupied his attention were the lines of shackled slaves being marched from some area in the compound to the pier head where a dark sleekly lined brig was waiting. He could see the white men on the dock and on the brig's deck. They were dirty, unkempt and in haste to stow the oncoming slaves through the hatches.

Only a hundred yards separated the *Grenita* from the *Estrella de Madrid*. Silas and Belle, indeed, every man aboard the *Grenita*, could observe the ruthless efficiency aboard the loading slaver.

Silas felt some twinge of disappointment. He had nurtured some private concept of raging crews of white men, armed to the teeth, whipping and bullying a cowering cluster of Negroes from the bush to the bulwarks of a waiting slaver. He had imagined the agony of a captured black man, writhing and struggling against the inevitable fate decreed for him by a masterful slaver. Blood and the perspiration of terror had somehow colored his concepts; the docility of slaves as he had often seen them in his youth, trudging wearily to labors on the plantation or milling about the barracoons in Havana, was a condition he had privately laid to futility and fear. He stared now, as a pair of tame slaves, festooned with Moslem fezes and ridiculous jackets, guided ten shackled slaves from the well-worn path to the splintered surface of the wharf. There was no blood and only the perspiration normal to the stifling heat of Africa. Their wrists and ankles were raw from the bite of shackles, but they seemed fat and well fed.

He watched the two black guards line the slaves before the white men, who unceremoniously knife-stripped away the loin cloths from the black hips. He found resentment in the way the slaves were handled to a man with a none-too-sharp razor. He

promptly shaved away all sign of head wool, then spun the slave to the brig side. Two more white men, backed up by another pair of tame slaves in little pot-pie red hats and scarlet coats, seized the shaved Negro, forced a handful of food down his throat, then gave him a pint of water to wash it down before hurling him into the hands of other white men who shackled the black to another. Almost before Silas could memorize a tattooed face and figure, the slave was pushed below deck, to be stored among similarly fated Negroes for whatever voyage faced the *Estrella de Madrid*.

It seemed cruel and unfeeling to Silas, but the pop of swinging whips and the curses were largely harmless in any physical sense. Then the longboat from shore came alongside and he was stricken with a second shock. Astern of the six huge Negroes who rowed the craft sat two people, obviously in command. One was a stocky man wearing thick Dutch spectacles. The other was a woman, not old, not young, but oddly attractive in a dark fashion that contrasted nicely with the wrinkled white cotton dress she wore, from close buttoned neck to the tops of her black, European shoes. She wore dirty white gloves that reached to the in-fold of her elbows. Her dark hair was gathered under a floppy hat more suitable to a man. But she smiled at Silas and her even teeth somehow made her half pretty.

In excellent Portuguese, she said, 'Ahoy, the *Grenita*. Welcome to the Bensanee. I am Señora Annella Priene. Mongo of the Bensanee,' she added as if aware that there must be a feminine to the noun, mongo, but displaying no knowledge of it.

Silas twitched and instinctively moved closer to Belle. In deference to his woman's lack of lingual facility, he smiled and said, in English, 'The brig, *Grenita*, out of Boston, United States under Spanish registry, madam. I am Silas King, the vessel's owner. This is Miss Belle Merver, of Quincy, Massachusetts. We are pleased to be here.'

From behind him, Captain Nello provided some more specific information, also in Portuguese. 'We are King-Alvarez, signora,' he announced pointing to the house burgee flying from the head of the mainmast. 'We bear twenty-five tons of trade, the best wishes of Don Alvarez del Prado, and some correspondence for Emile Priene.'

The dark woman rose in the longboat stern and climbed aboard the brig, paying no attention to fresh smudges on her gloves, nor to the saucer-wide eyes of the *Grenita's* crew. She spent only a moment surveying the vessel, then she frowned as its obvious elegance classified it as a non-slaving craft. She looked hard at

Captain Nello, then at Silas, and finally at Belle.

'Silas King,' she murmured. 'I had heard of you, Mr. King. Nearly ten years ago from the lips of your father. Oh, my husband is dead. Fever, nearly two months ago. I am in charge now.'

'Please accept our heartfelt sympathies, Señora Priene! I had not known misfortune had beset you,' Silas said gently. 'We had looked forward to meeting your husband - a man of some legend in my childhood.'

Annella Priene's eyes narrowed as if she detected some alien tone to Silas' words. 'Shore leave your watches as you see fit, Captain,' she said to Nello. 'There is a Soo-Soo village behind the bush, with plenty of yam wine, black whores and accommodations.' She waved one arm in a loose, encompassing gesture. 'There are quarters for yourself and your officers. If you will advise your watch officers, my chief clerk, Hans Gerhardt, will inventory your trade and see to its disembarkment.'

The stocky man in thick glasses, heretofore nearly invisible by his noninvolvement, bowed his half bald head on the thick neck and as if resolving his status, shuffled a clipboard bearing several sheets of paper, all covered with sharply square scribbling.

'Mr. King, I have adequate rooms in my house to request your presence as my guest. Despite the nature of the land, I have managed to retain some degree of comfort over the years, and I insist upon being hostess to you, and your affiliation to King-Alvarez!'

She called something in an African dialect over the bulwark and the six oarsmen in the longboat snapped out of their near dozing to steady the boat against the *Grenita's* hull.

Silas half bowed. 'Thank you, señora. I shall, in company with Miss Merver, be pleased to accept your hospitality.'

Belle giggled.

Annella Priene frowned. 'That nig - ' She hesitated, patently struggling for composure. 'I hadn't realized she was your traveling companion, Señor King.'

'There are several things I'm sure you have not realized, Senora Priene,' Silas said with some coldness.

'Señor King travels as an emissary of the abolitionist cause,' Captain Nello said.

'The hell,' Annella growled. Then she shrugged. 'At least, the first black to spend a night in my house will be a good looking one. Let's get ashore and out of this goddamned sun!'

All were helped over the rail by the stalwart oarsmen, all save Belle. Angry but momentarily helpless, Silas offered his own hand

to her, and made no issue of Annella Priene's decision to sit at his left instead of Belle's right. At Annella's command, the longboat moved forward, heading for a smaller, more private landing dock, seaward of the slave factory's congestion.

Having never seen the Priene house, Alvarez had been unable to warn Silas of its extensiveness and primitive luxury. Never having known either Emile Priene nor his wife, he also had no way of anticipating the basically European style of furnishings and room decorations. A decade had added some purely African features not present in Annella's original plans, but the long rear veranda, clustered with reed-walled rooms and cooking utensils merely testified to the consistency of African custom. Most comfortable was the netted area in the front of the house, overlooking the sea some three hundred yards to the east. The rattan furniture was worn and slightly dirty, but the foul was from age, not misuse.

Nor was Annella obtuse. She had a houseservant show Silas his room, which was separated from Belle's only by the African equivalent of a bathroom. There was a stand holding an enameled basin and a pitcher of cloudy water. Freshly laundered towels hung from a brass rod along one side of the stand. There was an area of large, uneven tile, boasting a drain to some nether area under the floor. A single water tap graced the wall three or four feet above the uneven tile, and a large, spotlessly clean galvanized washtub leaned patiently against the plank wall. There were small lockers, containing towels and lavatory supplements. The toilet was a porcelain monstrosity, with a wooden seat and a wooden tank, drained by a corroded brass pipe and activated by a corroded brass chain. The interior of the bowl seemed clean, but horribly stained by the kind of water piped from some jungle spring to the tank above.

Freshened somewhat, Silas stilled the multitude of contradictions in his mind and made his way to the netted veranda along the front of the house. He was quite impressed by the value and character of the furniture he passed, and the artifacts nicely distributed on stands and mantles. Perspiring, he thought the fireplace rather a grotesque presumption, but the iron-grated affair showed sooted African bricks. It was difficult to imagine that the large parlor could ever become cold enough to warrant a fire in the blackened cavity, but by then, he had already decided that Annella Priene was hardly a predictable woman.

She sat now, sipping a cold punch with Belle. They had been talking but fell silent when Silas appeared through the beaded

doorway. Devoid of her floppy hat and her smudged gloves, Annella had acquired new charm; it was never possible to tell whether or not Belle had made some special effort to display her brown beauty so he was merely pleased that she looked so pert and pretty. She too, was sipping an amber punch, and a third glass rested in the center of a broad, highly polished silver tray.

The heat was abominable, weighted with odors of mold and fungus. The smell of the barracoons was not strong on the veranda because the slave pens were upwind from the house. Silas endured the heat because Annella Priene seemed unperturbed by it.

'Your house is delightful, Señora Priene,' he ventured.

She laughed and waved him toward the waiting punch on the silver tray. 'A concession to civilization, perhaps, Señor King. Miss Merver and I have been talking. I think you are insane.'

It was his turn to smile, sharply because he did not feel amused. 'For my beliefs or for venturing to visit the Bensanee River?'

She sobered. 'If you are insane for your beliefs, then visiting here is incidental. Once I was susceptible to either position. After nearly ten years on the Bensanee, married to a rather successful if arbitrary mongo, I doubt that I could subscribe to an anti-slavery attitude.'

Alert to the fact that here was his first skirmish with an avowed enemy, Silas found astuteness. 'You have just said, madam, that ten years of association justifies any degree of wrong and makes one immune to the demands of human integrity.'

'I said no such goddamned thing, Señor King,' she replied, mouth hardening but not in anger. 'I merely observed that after ten years in a slave factory, dealing with bush niggers and the like, married pleasantly to a confirmed slave dealer who understood the blacks, I could hardly be friendly to an abolitionist. Particularly, one whom I suspect to be young enough to be my son! I was really evaluating wisdom, born of experience, Señor King.'

'I see. You mentioned nothing about the gold resulting from years of inhuman occupation,' he said.

'Twenty-five percent of which is deposited every six months to the accounts of King-Alvarez in Madrid, or Lisbon or Havana.'

To Silas, this was an unfair attack, then he realized that the forthright woman could not know of his unwavering dedication, nor of the bizarre manner in which he spent gold, theoretically the profits from slave holding and slave dealing. He debated explaining the situation to Annella and decided it would be to no point; the contest was not a matter of how money was made nor spent, it revolved around a principle which eventually meant life

or death to black people. He felt it unnecessary to remark that what he had seen in the past two hours had frightened him, not as a personal threat but as overwhelming evidence that the roots of slavery were huge and seemingly impregnable to attack. He sipped the punch.

'Sho good, ain't it, Silas?' Belle murmured.

'Very refreshing,' Silas conceded. 'Señora Priene. The slaver loading at the lagoon, how many slaves will she carry, and to where, may I ask?'

Annella seemed to think about the questions for a moment or two, or perhaps, he mused, about the right of the questioner to ask. Finally, she made a lop-sided mouth and shrugged.

'The *Star of Madrid* will take about four hundred niggers, begging your pardon, Miss Merver. She is bound for Santiago, Cuba, so her *capitan* says. I believe him because his specie is Havana minted doubloons. He is of Cuban origin, I'm sure.'

'Were you of my convictions, what would you do about it?'

Her mouth opened to speak, then closed tightly. After a second or so, she laughed sharply. '*Madre de Dios!* You have gall, Señor King! I am in the process of acquiring from Captain Grello, a neat twelve thousand dollars for the cargo I am supplying to him, and you ask me with a straight face, how to frustrate the bargain!'

Belle giggled.

Silas frowned. He had the feeling that no amount of missionary work would have convinced the shackled chains of Negroes to revolt against the fezed guards, or against the lightly armed white men who manned the brig at the pier. Their subjugation had seemed too complete, their faces had shown confusion and defeat, not resentment nor any deeply rooted desire for freedom.

'It may be necessary for me to go farther inland, to the villages and fields,' he thought aloud.

Annella made a head-serving gesture with her left hand. 'Señor King, the Bensanee factory has occupied this area for nearly fifteen years. My husband and I know most of the Mohammedan traders by their given names. We have eaten with them, drank with them, and provided buttons where their native ties have parted. On the other hand, no white man could possibly retain his head thirty miles up-trail from this house! We do not even dare send our tame slaves more than a few thousand feet up the river. A nigger, any nigger no matter his dress nor his purpose, is anything more than a salable slave a few yards from our barracons. Jungle trekking white men are enemies in the bush. I'd hate to have to tell you the fate of a jungle-trekking white woman!

Or a Negro woman as light skinned as is Miss Merver!

'I ain't fixin' to prove you is wrong, either,' Belle said.

They sat for a long time, took refills of the punch from white clad houseservants, perspired and differed. But gradually, Silas and Belle assumed silence, totally overwhelmed by Annella's positive and terrifying description of what lay hardly a few hundred yards from where they sat. Much of it Silas found difficult to believe, but he found the questionable items difficult to deny in the face of this coldly aware woman. When some mention of *cena* was made, he felt no hunger for dinner. He did feel heavy and tired and slightly a child, but as had other disappointments, he felt the impossibilities Annella described strengthen his determination to persevere. Dinner, cooked and served by slaves was disgustingly tasty. He had three tall glasses of yam wine with his food, refusing the more temperate Madeira Annella Priene recommended.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Within three days, Silas was sick of Africa, and the disgust he felt he blamed onto the fact that he and Belle, and the *Grenita*, were consigned to see the primitive land from the ugliness of a slave factory. He approached the matter of abolitionism with almost every one he came in contact with, and before long, he resolved himself to the certainty that anti-slavery sentiments not only seemed ridiculous to the white men who controlled the slaving operations but caused frowns of bewilderment to crease the black faces belonging to those tame slaves who understood basic English'

'I am not sure,' he said to Belle, one evening. 'It seems so logical when I think of it, when I see the misery and degradation even the tame slaves endure, yet any concept of freedom and forthright endeavor I remark is virtually laughed back down my throat. I am promptly treated to long, inept dissertations of how a father, or a tribal chief, functions within the slave system. Even the Soos, a tribal group nearly decimated by white slave buyers, seem to honor the hideous custom of selling a man or a woman to assuage some transgression, real or imagined! I am rapidly coming

to the conclusion that to mend their barbaric principles, it will be necessary to first force logic upon them, then await their gradual reaction to a more sensible way of life.'

'Maybe, give up,' Belle murmured, snuggling within the hard circle of his arm. 'I don't like this place much, Silas.'

Nor did Silas so he had no words of reproach for her. He sat with his back to the brass bedstead, protected by thick pillows stuffed with jungle chicken feathers. The lamp overhead cast yellow flickering light around the rattan walled room. His nostrils flared with the constant odor of mold and jungle rot, and occasionally, the waft of stink from the barracoons.

'I know,' he finally murmured. 'And I think we are not in a proper atmosphere for the establishment of right thinking. All here are drenched with endearment for the slave trade. From the grinning Mohammedans who bring their miserable caravans to the upper camp grounds to the Kroomen who make their livelihood paddling their canoes from the factory landing to the incoming vessels, not one thinks of honesty or righteousness nor of the wrong they do. The feel of fine gold, or the clink of coin rules their thinking and slavery seems their only enterprise in these interests! Oh, Belle, if only I were able to give them an insight to what I have seen, what I have witnessed!'

'In Cuba,' she stated.

'Ha! Cuba, indeed! My darling, you were never in Cuba! I think as blackly about the human injustices of Boston as I ever could about the outrages of slavery in Cuba! No segment of the horror is without fault!' He waved a free arm in a giant circle that encompassed the clearings, the warehouses and the barracoons behind the Priene house. 'Out there,' he said grimly. 'A half thousand Negroes, hungry, frightened, maltreated. All were torn from their homes and fields, hurled ruthlessly into the jaws of greed! Women and children, some hardly large enough to abandon their mother's breast, destined to be crowded and whipped into a state below the dignity of man, then sold to uncaring brokers in a land which knows no mercy for a black skin! All for money, my darling, the pure grossness of gold. It sickens me with frustration and anger! Negroes can think and love and hope like any other man! They feel and respond to life like the best bred white!'

Belle giggled. 'Like them big old niggers yesterday?'

Silas fell momentarily silent. He too, remembered the chaos surrounding the arrival of the Mali caravan the previous afternoon. Assured by Annella that in the beginning days, the welcoming of caravans had been a completely serious festivity, he

had been appalled at the barbaric arrogance of the traders.

The caravan had entered the upper camping grounds with all the force of a conquering army. Leading the long train of traders, porters and slaves, had been a half dozen naked warriors, brandishing spears and shields and loaded muskets. The latter had been fired into the air indiscriminately, a concession to announcement and the Africans' love of racket. These warriors went directly to the stilted huts erected to accommodate caravan personnel. They had made no attempt to accost Annella Priene nor any of the white handlers who had assembled as a welcoming committee. They had gone about the business of securing the area against lurking enemies and thieving Soo-Soos, then had seen to the erection of certain Mohammedan symbols of holiness at the veranda of the largest and most regal house.

Shortly then, the caravan entered the compound, led by a few more spear carrying blacks. Behind them had appeared the robed and feather hatted traders, forty of them. They had marched in tiers, according to their rank in the eyes of the caravan chieftain. They had peeled off in twos and fours to lesser huts, not daring to presume upon the regality of the chieftain. Nonetheless, it had taken Annella and her handlers nearly an hour to properly greet the royal party, during which the trailing members of the caravan turned right and left to find quarters in considerably lesser huts and open spaces. The livestock had trailed nearly a hundred shackled slaves, the former seeming to be in much better condition than the latter. The slaves were herded into a pole pen, the goats and sheep and cattle were moved to competent corrals.

Half of the caravan members were already drunk, having anticipated arrival with jugs and demijohns of brutally fermented yam wine. Many were obstreperous to the point of near belligerency. They seemed to heed only small waves and gestures from the Mohammedan chieftain, and the whips applied by bush guards to the lesser dignitaries.

Silas still could not understand the seemingly endless small bits of flattery and concession Annella Priene had afforded the loud and crudely mannered traders. He had stood in the background, speechless with wonder and crawling with an inner pain he had not tried to name. No teetotaler, he had yet lamented the number of casks, laden with wine from Spain, Portugal and the south of France, that had been split open for the pleasure of the Africans. By nightfall, almost every man and woman of the caravan, except for those obviously assigned as royal guards, were roaring drunk. Many had succumbed to drunken slumber, flop-

ping anywhere they could find an area not endangered by staggering foot traffic.

The Mohammedan chieftain had brought twelve harem females, a half dozen more belonged to lesser traders. They had been slower to acquire a degree of inebriation, largely because they had not been included in the earlier, trail festivities, but they were quick to catch up because few of them had any resistance to the wiles of the fermented grape. Until ten, the rattle of musket fire and the din of drunkenness made sleep in Annella's house impossible. When wine and weariness finally quieted the members of the caravan, Silas had been unable to sleep, so disturbed was he by the seeming devotion of bush Africans to the joys of visiting a slave factory.

Already accustomed to her placid nature, he had not become angry when Belle fell fast asleep following her failure to interest him in the delights of her body. Alone at last, he fought the urge to weep.

Now he tightened his encircling arm and clung tightly to Belle, seemingly his only certainty in a land comprised largely of enemies. He hardly noticed her use of the word 'niggers', nor did he realize that he had failed to reproach her for this lingual slip during the past few days.

Eventually, he fell asleep, battered by useless efforts to find a way to penetrate the minds and reason of African bushmen.

Belle felt neither happy, sad nor concerned about the way her man reacted to what he termed 'the impossible starvation' of African intellect. She wasn't even sure what intellect was except that it seemed to be something Silas accorded to file-toothed Negroes and mysterious, unnamed people he often referred to during his fits of verbalizing. She did not resent the hours he spent, wandering through the Bensanee settlements or in and around the barracoons. That he seemed driven by some inner force she acknowledged without worrying much about the force nor its effects. She kept her life simple and uncomplicated because in nearly twenty years, she had never learned how to unsimplify nor complicate her existence.

Likes and dislikes, she established with nearly primitive certainty. African food she held in tolerance; she bathed because Silas liked her clean and smelling of soap. She hated Negroes who were darker than she, which included the entire population of the Bensanee house and the lagoon-side establishment as well as

the gutturally noisy if unobservable inhabitants of the barracoons.

She adored the house of Annella Priene because it was large and comfortable and completely serviced by Negroes who were darker than she and subserviently trained to every unpleasant task Belle could imagine. She was not required to wash clothes, pick up anything she dropped nor concern herself with adequate supplies of food, punch or strong tea. Her sole 'tasks', if they could be named, were to please Silas physically, muss up her unused bed each morning and maintain a certain degree of cleanliness. For the most part, Belle minded only the insufferable heat and the hostess.

From the beginning, she had known that Annella Priene considered her a bed-wench fortunate enough to have impressed a rich white man. Annella had never refrained from using the word 'nigger' in reference to a black person, nor had she ever spoken admirably about the Negroes who fed her, nor the blacks who kept her establishment in order. In themselves, these aspersions did not anger Belle, because she knew she was a bed-wench and she knew she was not white, but whenever she thought of Annella, she pouted inwardly, unable to isolate a specific charge against the woman but aware of a dislike that was often hard to control.

In Belle's mind, there was no question of equality; she was not harassed by Annella's whiteness nor by her own brownness. She never spent a moment in the morning wondering what she could wear that would outdo the flouncy Portuguese dresses Annella wore, nor did she ever compare her hair to Annella's flowing locks. Belle's equality lay in her attractiveness to Silas King. She had a man who took good care of her, from bedtime to bedtime, and who seemed happy with his lot. It did not occur to Belle to count this as an advantage over Annella although there had been a time or two when the shadow in Annella's dark eyes had indicated man-interest, and subsequently, jealousy.

Any alarm Belle might have felt at these moments was quickly dispelled by Silas himself. He seemed so enamoured with her that she could not imagine a circumstance that could threaten her solidity in his affections. In her mind, the formula for security was ridiculously simple. She needed only to nearly agree with his odd attitudes, overwhelm him with sexual enthusiasms and be at his hand when he was afflicted with one of his reflectively anguished moods. For some reason Belle did not try to understand, her body in his hands relaxed his tensions and turned his thoughts to happier ones.

That she was beginning to doubt his wisdom was a private

thought. She had listened to his theories about the evils of slavery many times and she knew by memory most of the adamant arguments he gave in justification for 'African freedom'. She was remotely aware of the gigantic effort he had made, with her in company, to put himself in a position to appeal directly to the African within the aura of black nativity. Belle's doubts arose from the fact that against the relative happiness of slaves she had been raised with, the African bushmen seemed consistently morose and harassed. Freedom, as her man explained it, seemed utterly without merit. Saving the drunken, loud-mouthed Mohammedans who brought slaves to the Bensanee, drank more wine and debauched with any Negro woman they could find, the Africans Belle had seen seemed terribly unhappy with their 'freedom'. In fact, she privately termed them 'dumb niggers' and avoided them whenever it was possible.

The *Estrella de Madrid* had left the Bensanee lagoon five days ago, and the schooner *La Barca* had been gone a day, her load of three hundred and seventy-five slaves finished out with trail-weary blacks from the boisterous Mohammedan caravan. White handlers were supervising the grading and selection of the livestock brought down from the interior, and the Bensanee compounds were back to their normal lethargy. Silas strolled aimlessly along the trails, resenting what he saw but unable to provide a more suitable program of action.

Men, white and black, nodded or stepped aside with proper respect; his connection with King-Alvarez was widely known. This disturbed him considerably because within himself, he wanted desperately to meet these people, white and black, on their chosen level and expound to them the convictions and arguments he had cultivated for many years. Preferential treatment only deepened his isolation and frustrated the latent missionary in his character.

For some reason, he dared not look out at the *Grenita*, anchored in the middle of the lagoon. Her bow hove slightly higher than before, the twenty-five tons of trade goods she had carried into the Bensanee now was stacked in appropriate warehouses, accurately invoiced by Hans Gerhardt. Somehow, the sleek brig seemed accusatory, almost an indictment. She had sailed the Atlantic in the care and keeping of thirty-eight seamen, on a voyage Silas now thought of as half useless and certainly misguided. Not even profitable, as the standards of King-Alvarez counted profits. He walked on slowly, venturing up the riverside

trail past the still unrepaired compounds left by the caravan's uncaring inhabitants.

Deep in gloom, Silas did not see the long dugout canoe with the after canopy until the noise of paddles turned him. He saw the craft, paddled by four stalwart Kroomen, heading toward a place on the river bank. He had never seen a Krooman canoe with a canopy, so it took him a minute to identify the passenger under the canopy. Until Annella Priene leaned forward into the sunlight, speaking dialect to the paddlers, he imagined a number of possibilities, none of them without some shade of apprehension. Then he smiled as the canoe shot to the bank, hesitated, then broadsided the rain eroded shore.

'Ah, Señora Priene,' he said, tipping his broad planter's hat. 'I had not thought -'

'Get in and under the canopy,' she said. 'This sun is hot, even if it is but midmorning! You are far up the river, Señor King.'

'I had not noticed. Am I in danger?'

'Another mile or so would have cost you your head,' she said matter-of-factly. 'I was going up river to see the condition of the down-trail. Since the rains, many things could have happened. Bensanee mud is like wet sand, and visiting caravans have a right to a whole trail. What had you hoped to find up here?'

Seated on the rough stern thwart, Silas stretched out his legs and sighed. 'It was a pointless venture. But perhaps I was seeking a friendly spirit, a rarity on the Bensanee!'

Her right hand came out and laid lightly on his arm. 'But I am friendly, Silas King,' she murmured, her body swaying for and aft with the paddle surges. 'I respect your convictions, even if I doubt their validity. Oh, I know. We who have spent many years in the trade are calloused and greedy and unsympathetic to many less intent attitudes than our own, but this does not render us unfeeling. You can not remember him, but your own father was one of the most placid men I ever knew, in the face of opinions that varied from his. He seemed to possess no temper at all!'

'My father! He was the most violently opinionated man I ever knew!' Silas exclaimed. For a moment, her look of surprise held him as hypnotized as if she were a cobra.

'Odd,' she said. 'How different our opinions of Jacob King can be! Of course, I was an adult when I knew him, and you could have been hardly more than a child - a little boy, really!'

'He was a terrible man,' Silas volunteered what he thought was a mild assessment.

'No, Silas, my dear. He was one of the most remarkable men I

ever knew,' Annella said positively. 'There was hardly anything he couldn't do,' she said, nodding back over her shoulder. 'He would stand like a great bear, his face revealing nothing of what he thought. Here on the Bensanee, he approached a physical problem that would have intimidated another man - it frightened my husband half out of his wits. During the reconstruction of our factory, your father literally bulled his way through hazards, never hesitating, even in the face of horrible personal dangers. Oh, I won't try to tell you he was an angel. He was a devil, really, totally sure of himself and unafraid of anything that walked or crawled! Did you know that the price on his head guaranteed by the British Admiralty set most of Jacob's own kind against him, yet it was never collected nor even nearly so? A terrible man, Silas? I would have given my soul if he had ever looked at me with desire in his eyes!'

'I saw him order the whipping of fifty innocent slaves,' Silas said then. 'Many of them died as a result of his cruelty. He murdered my brother, and was responsible for the death of the only woman I ever loved - as a mother. I know of nearly a half dozen slaves he personally killed, and in the end, he married a woman with Negro blood in her veins and all the despicable habits a pass-over mulatto can acquire!'

Annella sat quietly, digesting the bitterness in the young man's voice. Silas sat as quietly, but his mind was consumed by rudely awakened memories. He half regretted his harsh denunciation of Elena King, but it seemed important to expose his feelings to the woman at his side. The infrequent times she arose and stepped forward into the sunlight to inspect the river bank and the broad path that climbed ever upward only added flavor to their association. Each time she returned to the stern thwart, her well rounded hip pressed more securely to his lean thigh.

Abruptly she said, 'It is very lonely here, Silas. I miss being a wife, not because my husband was a marvelous person - he was really quite disagreeable! But he was a man, attuned to my moods and my habits - and my body. Do you think I am attractive?'

It didn't startle him because he had felt vague stirrings in his own torso merely watching her graceful rising and sitting. 'Yes, I do,' he murmured, finding it easy to close his hand over hers on his left forearm. Then he smiled. 'I am surprised that my father - I can not imagine how lovely you must have been ten years ago!'

'But I am now only twenty-seven, Silas!' she laughingly protested. 'Emile was much older than I.'

'I am twenty-one,' Silas said for no apparent reason.

Again she laughed, the merriment seeming to emphasize the roll of her breasts and the delicacy of her waist. 'Men always seem older than they are,' she decided. 'And there is an age when numbers are far less important than understanding. Oh, Silas, I become so weary with all of this to mind!'

Her free hand took in the river and the jungle and the world. A gush of sentimental sympathy flushed his face and neck. In the week that he had known her, he had grown used to ignoring the shadow of her incipient moustache and the grime that further flawed her unmanicured fingers. He perspired constantly; he had grown used to the half moons at her armpits and the clumsy press of her Portuguese gowns. He looked now at her profile and thought about how beautiful she was. Instinctively, his fingers closed tightly around her hand and he felt the firmness of her response. He looked resentfully at the naked black backs of the paddlers, streaked with sweat that coursed down over the ripple of purple tattoos and made rivulets into the dirty loin cloths of the tame bushmen.

'It doesn't matter, Silas,' she murmured. 'They're niggers!'

'They have eyes and tongues,' he whispered into her ear, suddenly very close to his lips.

'They are blind with stupidity, and I shall have their tongues torn out!' she said with new intensity.

He didn't know what to believe nor what to do, but his arms were full of trembling, pulsating woman, and soft lips met his, clinging possessively to the mouth he hadn't known he offered. Nor was she simply a body beneath perspiration damp cotton. He held her close, then his mind passed some line of decision. The next problem was how it could be managed on the canoe thwart, with limited legroom and no cushioning, but evidently, Annella had already figured that out.

Their lusting added a new motion to the stern of the canoe but the paddlers only acknowledged this by slowing their strokes and holding the dugout close to the river bank. Silas suffered life and death in alternate glory and in intermediate moments of calm, wondered what kind of a man Emile Priene had really been.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There were clouds and blisters on the mirror, but Silas was able to get a full view of himself without much shifting about. He took another swallow of Madeira wine and set forth to appraise himself. Physically, this was simple and enjoyable. He was tall and slim waisted, and he had been told for years that he had acquired none of his father's thick limbed, bull-shouldered bulk but had taken after his slim Spanish mother's family. He was handsome in a dark Latin way and though he thought of himself as a man harried by rigid principles, concern had plowed no lasting furrows on his brow.

He squared his shoulders under the ruffled, Bond Street shirt and snugged his trousers about his hard and narrow hips. Turning, he gave his brushed hair a pre-emptory flick with his slender hands. Silas was pleased with himself, and when he turned to look at Belle, lying quietly on the bed, he was pleased to see that his moments of vanity had gone unnoticed. She seemed asleep, her eyes closed, her lips slack. By then, he knew that her period of menstruation invariably laid her low for a day or so. Privately, Silas thought he needed but one night.

He left his bedchamber and moved soundlessly down the unsquared corridor, eyes squinted against the dimness of the sparsely placed lamps. He paused a moment at the beaded doorway leading into the parlor, but he did not enter. Satisfied that the house was deserted by all except the inevitable black servants on the rear veranda, he moved past the gently waving beads to the closed door of Annella Priene's room. It was a paneled door, weathered by heat and twenty years of hanging as a portal in a Spanish convent. He had no knowledge of how proud Emile Priene had been of the door. It now only represented a slight barrier between Silas and Annella. He turned the loosely set knob and without a sound, the heavy door opened to a new and interesting vista.

The dingy brown mosquito bar hung in loops at every quarter of the four poster, but the skirts had been tucked neatly up, presenting a bold view of Annella. She lay in a feminine sprawl, her naked body deliberately enticing, the smile on her thin lips one of positive provocation. As Silas closed the door behind him,

she raised a limpid hand, beckoning, welcoming, and greeting him with singular softness. He smiled and approached the bed, privately considering his first move. He did not know whether to remove his boots and trousers then, or to wait for some less brutal moments to pass.

'Dear Silas,' Annella murmured when he extended his hand.

'She's asleep,' Silas said. 'You are beautiful, beautiful!'

His words turned her body into a writhing, sinuous plea. Mobility rolled and splayed upon mobility. The nipples of her breasts gleamed with Portuguese brownness, and the layers of soft flesh, stretched tautly by her sprawl, seemed like gentle cushions over the delicate bones beneath. She was very white; he neglected to remember that Annella was the first naked white woman he had ever seen. He knew only that the broad blanket of coal black hair growing from her high, inner thighs up over her maturely curved belly was devastatingly lovely, and that the deep bush of equally black hair in each armpit was somehow proper accent for her whiteness. His passion for her charms became monstrous.

Toe to heel, he removed his Bostonian street boots. His fingers were sure and hasty at his belt and his trousers dropped down around his hairy thighs. Being male, he was proud of the satyric figure he presented, rampant, enthusiastic and imposing. To the display, he added a small involuntary hunch of his hips, impressive to Belle but exacting a different reaction from Annella.

She coiled and rolled, giving him a jolting look at her bended rump, but the reason for her bend became obvious when she ended in a sitting position on the far edge of the bed. Languorously but quickly, she availed herself of an opaque *bata*, which shrouded her nakedness with obscurity. She twisted to face him, smiling the smile of an amused woman.

'W-what's the matter?' he asked in amazement.

'It suddenly seemed ridiculous, at least to me,' she said.

'Ridiculous?'

She looked away. 'I was never a passionate woman, Silas. Four days ago on the river I was curious, sentimental and in need. Or thought I was in need! Seeing you now, that way, I am aware of how a frantic old woman must seem to you. Well, not old, perhaps, but past the age of blubbering lust! We are not for each other, Silas!'

The seconds passing while he resumed his trousers and boots were the longest, least comfortable he remembered having spent. When they were over and the job was completed, he thought he

hated her for the rejection she had tendered. The other half of his brain refused to accept the certainty that she had looked upon his male elegance and turned away from him.

Finally, in total confusion, he sank to a seat on the edge of the bed and leaned on stiff arms, staring at her robed back. He seemed breathless and in physical turmoil, a condition he managed to control before he spoke.

'I had not thought we were - falling in love,' he said.

Again she turned, closer now, but somehow more distant. 'I know. It is seldom a thought that occurs to a man! But I am a woman! Further, I am nearly thirty, a widow, and n-not pretty!' She held her hands up, backs to view and surveyed her unkempt fingernails. Slowly her hands closed and settled to the bed. 'I am a Portuguese whore, Silas, lately widowed after ten years of marriage to a trusting man! Other than Emile, you are the only other man I have bedded in those years. Am I to be blamed if I thought, for a time, that Fate had given me another chance?'

'You believed I could be - serious, about you?'

Her laugh was short and bitter. 'Why not believe that? Oh, it was my fault! You call yourself Silas - I half thought of you as Jacob! Your father made more ponderous decisions than love in a tenth of time you've had to know me! You are a beautiful man. He was ugly and brutal and as emotionally passive as a stone mountain! Oh, what am I saying?'

She fought to subdue tears and Silas granted her a few seconds to regasp her emotions. Then he chuckled. 'It seems to me you are confessing a long ignored love of my father.'

She sniffed volubly. 'No. I only say that he was the kind of man any woman I've ever known would have died for had she the opportunity! About us - I am sorry but I was confused!'

He pursed his cleanly molded lips, then he got up and went to the sideboard. He poured himself an overly generous portion of Cuban rum and gulped at it with impatience.

'I guess it doesn't matter, now,' he mused. 'Oh. I had not mentioned it, but morning after tomorrow, we are sailing from the Bensanee.'

'Oh? To where, Silas?' she asked as if genuinely interested.

He raised his granite hard chin, rolling the rum around in his mouth. 'To Freetown, in Sierra Leone,' he told her. 'I concede that without some prior advantage, my mission is difficult. I understand that the British and certain civilian abolitionists, have succeeded in making some inroads there, toward an eventual abolition of the hideous trade.'

'F-Freetown?'

'Your tone questions my judgment, Annella.'

'Who told you about Freetown?' she asked.

'Why, my mentor in most matters, Don Alvarez del Prado.'

The smile that slowly crossed her face merely told Silas that she had recovered from the shock he had undoubtedly given her.

He told Belle in the morning after he had spent an early hour thinking out matters he had been too drunk to think about the night before. Belle was overjoyed and promised to be well enough to start the voyage. They played some, Silas exerting monumental control to keep from crossing a sensual point to a moment from which there could be no return. Mutually, they pouted over monkish necessity, then Silas dressed and went in search of Captain Nello, whom he knew needed time to gather his shore enamoured crew and provision the *Grenita* for the short voyage and perhaps a longer sojourn at anchor.

By two, he had drank enough Spanish wine and eaten enough West Indian jerky to require a *siesta*, and Captain Nello helped him to his stateroom and removed his boots.

He awakened at six, morose and lethargic from long hot hours of slumber. Repairing to the deck, he flopped into one of the quarterdeck chairs, his eyes flicking unhappily out over the slave factory compounds. He did not admit failure on the Bensanee, he did acknowledge his inexperience in dealing with white men and black who populated these hell holes of inhuman congress. He knew that the factory was a legal thing, even if the trade it fostered had been outlawed on the high seas by every country in the world. It gratified him not at all to guess that this fact would someday extend to the slave markets and eventually, to the men who now became fabulously wealthy utilizing the work-tortured bodies of Negroes. With youth's naïveté, Silas believed that in the end, all of the evils on the earth would end, subdued by the overwhelming number of right thinking people of every country.

He perceived the wharves, the warehouses, and the distant corner of a slave filled barracoon, and he ached with agony at the lethargy of the tame blacks who gave the clearings the appearance of a maggot covered side of beef. There lay the problem, he was sure, but he was unable to put his mind to a proper solution.

Such thoughts made Silas feel very young and inept, and he salved his wounds by remembering that while he sat aboard his own ship, in an anchorage upon which he had proprietorial claim, his friends in Boston, in all of Massachusetts forged doggedly on

with their own brand of abolitionism.

While he loafed in the early autumn sun, they argued amendments and questions of legality, making their slow, small dents in the armor of pro-slavery, risking their lives and livelihood at clandestine rallies and meetings, repeating their homilies and prayers until listeners were infected with the same enthusiasms as the psalm shouters. He retired to his quarters for a rum, firmly convinced that however slow his beginning, he was bound to succeed. Not once had he ever admitted that he could fail; his cause was too exalted, this purpose too clearly stated.

What the slowly sobering seamen were doing confused him, and seemed pertinent only to Captain Nello's watch officers. At six-thirty, with enough time to bathe and dress before *cena*, Silas summoned two sailors to row him ashore. Only then did he think about Annella and her earlier refusal of his love. Two large rums away from the listlessness of his siesta, he chuckled at the laments he remembered from the lips of 'the Portuguese whore'. Not a moment did he consider himself unfortunate; her words about a 'second chance' convinced him that he had barely escaped what could have been an embarrassing situation.

He made his way south to the Priene house without wondering what his reception would be, nor caring greatly. He was Silas King, and the woes of a Portuguese widow were none of his affair. He did wonder if she had made as strenuous an assault upon his father ten years ago as she had made upon him in the canoe. To this he even shrugged, convinced that he did not care what his father had done, and he certainly had nothing to say about how Annella Priene had conducted herself. He had reasonably convinced himself that being female, she was subject to any number of weird emotions. This brought him face to face with the fact that not once had Belle ever plagued him with emotional complications.

Being impatient, he was sorry when he discovered Belle had already bathed and dressed and was sipping tea laced with South American brandy on the veranda with Annella. He bathed and dressed, cultivating a compelling thirst as he fiddled with buttons and fittings.

These were the times Doctor John Merriweather adored and abhorred with equal passion. It wounded his spirit to learn that three of the crew had acquired African gonorrhea from diseased Soo-Soo whores, but it thrilled him immensely to administer soothing powders and potions to crewmen too deeply embroiled

with the after effects of too much yam wine and spiced goat meat to attend watch. He bandaged a cut or two after soaking the already festering skins with peroxide and turpentine, depending upon the location of the wounds. He ignored the confusion of putting the brig to sea, just as he pointedly avoided coming face to face with Belle Merver.

More than once, he had considered abandoning the *Grenita* but these thoughts had occurred during morning morosity, due to a night of unlimited drinking and the unbridled attentions of a Soo-Soo whore who did not understand middle-aged lethargy but did understand the nature of white men. Eventually, he had abandoned the shrine of self-sacrifice; the *Grenita* was a fine vessel, his quarters were nearly splendid, and even if Belle was the bed-wench of Silas King, she was a nigger, and she had sought an extra-curricular affair with far more avidity than he remembered having displayed. His evasion of a confrontation was not due to shame, nor fear, except for the possibility that she might care to play an encore, a situation for which he had no appetite.

The brig had been at sea a full four hours before he raised his head in awareness. The splash of the twelve pound ball across the bow had come first, shortly followed by the boom of the carronade in the bow of the British frigate. Within seconds, the *Grenita* had ceased to lunge as the helmsman swung the brig in an arc to nullify the drive of full sail. Seconds later, the entire ship's company on deck, the jibs and topsails were collapsed, and the fore and aft mains'ls were slacked to flap in the tradewinds.

Hardly more than curt boarding instructions came from the helm, where Captain Nello was in serious conference with Silas King. The ship's company had no fear of British slave patrols, the holds were not only empty but free of any indications that slaves might have been carried. If there was a damning bit of evidence aboard, it flew from the topsail mast, the burgee of King-Alvarez Company. Captain Nello, certain of his condition under International Law, chose to ignore the purple banner with its significant white border.

Not until the *Grenita* lay nearly under the shadow of the *H.M.S. Altoona*, and the frigate's longboat, bristling with armed sailors and besparkled by the brass and silver of three naval officers, did he remember the *Grenita*'s one shortcoming. He spun to Silas, his face as hard as stone.

'Sir, there is one problem, I am afraid. Your woman. She is obviously Negro. She may be considered a slave in transport if she does not possess papers validated by a dignitary of an American

court! There will be no question about her status in respect to you, sir. By the law, she is a Negro being shipped from one port to another. Without adequate papers, she will be considered a slave, and this vessel and all aboard stand convicted of slave running by her mere presence aboard!"

From the recesses of his memory he brought forth a tale long ago recounted by Jerome. The idea of putting Belle over the side to take her chances with drowning, or sharks following the *Grenita* was impossible. His next thought was bravado. The papers he held on her were stored in Boston. Not a document aboard the *Grenita* even suggested she was a slave, and he was utterly confident that one look at her would establish her innocence, even in the eyes of a British Admiralty man.

"There is nothing to do but face them with facts, captain. Miss Merver is not a slave. I might add that this predicament would not have occurred had you respected my command to marry us some days ago!"

"There is an alternative that might suffice," Nello said.

"Name it, captain."

"If we can immediately consign her to Doctor Merriweather's sick bay, cover her somewhat and pretend an atmosphere of severe illness, she may be overlooked in the search. Particularly if the doctor diagnoses her condition as contagious!"

"Is there time?" Silas queried, counting the buttons on the blue blouse of the longboat's commanding officer.

Nello moved, but over his shoulder he said, "To a captain worth his salt, there are many ways to gain time against a boarding party! Doctor Merriweather!"

Time was gained through courtesy. Painted white and sparkling with brass fittings, the *Grenita* had not impressed the frigate's commanding officer as a slaver. When the unseasonable surge of the brig had quieted sufficiently to permit the boarding party to climb aboard the brig, the search and seize officer, Lieutenant Ambercrombie, was confronted by a façade of near elegance that subdued his tigerish instincts. The brig's captain was completely uniformed in bleached tropic whites. The owner was impeccably dressed in Boston serge. The watch officers, if bearded and scowling, were neat and polite. The seamen, gathered in curious clusters in the lee of every shadow, were typically unkempt and fever-eyed, but the vessel itself, was devoid of slave stink and any sign of trade evidence. He bowed in the best tradition of a British officer.

'Lieutenant Ambercrombie, in command, gentlemen. It is my duty to advise you that the *H.M.S. Altoona*, frigate royal of the British Navy, is obliged to order your stoppage, so that your ship may be searched in compliance with International Law as it is legally prescribed in the anti-slavery provisions. You are the captain, sir?'

'Yes. Emanuel Nello, of Havana. We are in ballast, headed for Sierra Leone, sir. Here. The ship's papers, all in proper trim, I am sure.'

'Yes,' Ambercrombie said, handing the sheaf of papers to the subordinate at his left. 'I regret this inconvenience, sirs!'

It took another minute or so to introduce Silas as the brig's owner, the watch officer, then the ranking members of the boarding party. Finally, Ambercrombie retrieved the brig's papers and ordered the subaltern to begin a search of the ship.

'I am sure a perfunctory examination should satisfy us, Ensign Heber,' he added softly. 'Me Yorkshire nose detects no slave foul here!' He turned then, stiffly saluted the frigate and made quick hand movements. The sailors standing guard at the bulwarks relaxed visibly. Captain Nello led the search and seize officer to the cabins under the quarterdeck. Wine was poured as the lieutenant wrote out a proviso pass, valid under the eyes of any other search and seize officer who might question their cargo. Silas, inwardly nervous, but outwardly calm, thought of Belle in the sick bay, frightened but safe.

At that moment, he subconsciously revitalized a disease that had lain dormant in King blood for ten years. He developed an incipient hate for the British slave patrols, and thusly for the entire lion, and he revised his measure of respect for the precise and slightly pompous members of the British Admiralty. In his mind, they represented the finest naval men in the world, and at the same time, some of the most naïve.

The interlude lasted another fifteen minutes, some of which was spent in fatuous goodbyes and words about the predominant weather to be found between the 10th parallel and the in-bay anchorage. When the longboat, reloaded with its slightly disappointed crew, moved smartly from the *Grenita*, Captain Nello gave crisp orders to the relaxed crew. He also ordered the brig's steward to provide a tin of rum to every man aboard, then he re-joined Silas in the master's cabin.

'We were lucky, sir,' Nello observed with a sigh.

'I shall light a candle to St. Christopher,' Silas said.

'May I suggest an additional pound be added to the physician's

due, sir. I would suggest that of us all, he had the most difficult task to carry out.'

'Attending Miss Merver's imaginary disease?'

'Attending Miss Merver, sir, would be problematical at best.'

But Silas had turned his mind in other directions so he did not hear. It did not occur to him to go forward and search her out in the foc'sle; he was thinking about Freetown and Sierra Leone and not at all about the fragments of his own life, fragments which he expected to fall properly in place without undue care.

Later in a fit of rum-soaked righteousness, he was forced to look at Belle with a jaundiced eye. Somehow, he was emotionally able to ignore his affection for her and to consider her for what she was, what she had been in Captain Nello's pre-boarding qualms. She was a Negro and she was a slave. The young search and seizure lieutenant had had every right to claim the *Grenita* as a prize and to deliver her officers and men to the military authorities in Sierra Leone for subsequent trial and punishment. Silas was not sure what he had a right to do with Belle, and so he poured himself another rum, contenting himself with speculations based upon his furry view of the mulatto girl, seated with her back to the salon bulkhead. She neither smiled nor pouted, nor had she volunteered any details of her prolonged sojourn in the sick bay of the brig. Motionless, she was just there, and after a moment of perusal, Silas let his eyes refuse focus and she became only part of the salon furnishings.

It occurred to him in maudlin recall, that he had permitted Captain Nello to nullify his beliefs in abolitionism by sending a slave into hiding, when the proper behavior would have been to tell the truth and support the British lieutenant's anti-slavery efforts. He frowned; the proper thing didn't seem very appealing. His mouth worked dryly as he tried to penetrate the confusion his thoughts had created. He drank another strong pull from his silver cup, and decided there might be times when black was better gray and white was conceded some shadows.

As he had unconsciously done many times before, he let his brain turn to the only positive cure he knew for confusion. He stood up, swaying slightly but not nearly in rhythm to the unsteadiness of his vision. Belle lifted her chin, looked querulously at him, then smiled as she recognized the bloated pout of his lips. With calculated sensuousness, she left the settee and came to her feet very close to Silas.

His nostrils caught her musky odor, his skin reflected the

animal heat of her body. Through a nearly drunken haze, he looked down at her lushly curved shape, and let his eyes follow the delectable curves of her neck and shoulders. Below this, she was out-thrust and lithe, with significant valleys and exciting bulges. He put one arm around her shoulders and turned toward the door to the companionway leading into the bunk bordered stateroom. Belle giggled.

"You fine, man?" she asked softly.

Silas laughed, a wet, spittle-spraying guttural of pleasure. He cured this coarseness with the last rum in the goblet. "You just bet your black ass I'm fine, honey," he muttered. "Beat the god-damned British and saved us all! Time to celebrate, huh?"

He was too drunk to notice how dead her face had gone at his reference to the color of her considerable anatomy, and he was suddenly too excited to observe the surreptitious manner in which she surveyed her crotch as she dropped the long, closely fitted gown, lately donned in the sick bay of the *Grenita*. Neither caution nor suspicion suited his present mood.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He had not known what to expect so his first sight of the harbor was disappointing. He had survived the shock of discovering how primitive the establishment on the Bensanee had been, assuaging his surprise with the thin comfort of acknowledging that it was a commercial venture, despicable if not illegal, and subject to all the evils it bred as well as the evils it inherited from Africa. But he had expected Freetown, and the ship-littered harbor to be more precise. It had, after all, been a British Crown colony since 1807 and the home port of the British Anti-Slavery Patrol for nearly forty years.

While the harbor control cutter inspected his manifests and raised eyebrows at the hand-scrawled pass made out by the search and seizure officer of the *H.M.S. Altoona*, Silas peered at the peculiar coastline of the Sierra Leone river mouth.

Some of the land, mountainous down to the slap of the rising autumn surf, was dry and arid, not unlike the cluster of forlorn islands they had passed coming in from the sea. Back of Freetown,

which lay festering along the irregular shoreline, the land was low and spongy with swamp. The huge harbor was loosely dotted by anchorages. One held only British naval ships of the line, men-of-war, frigates, cutters and lesser craft, all showing some deck activity. To the west was another cluster of vessels, all showing some damage. These were captured slavers, hauled or sailed into the harbor as British prizes, or as symbols of English diligence along the Windward Coast, the slavers' paradise. Other areas held the anchored hulls of coastal traders. From the sea, Freetown looked immensely prosperous. When the *Grenita* was once more under weigh and had passed close to the anchored flotillas, the façade disappeared. Most of the ships in the harbor were poor, unpainted and in need of repair.

Nello brought the *Grenita* to anchor hardly three hundred yards offshore, and from the length of chain required to settle the forward anchors, Silas received the impression that a bit farther out, the harbor would be bottomless. This observation occurred in a stolen moment; his entire attention was turned upon the face of Freetown, now close enough to permit identification of many buildings and compounds.

The city was not large, but it seemed huge because it was divided into many individual areas. The waterfront was sewn with warehouses and commercial trading establishments, shadowed by an irregular and unkempt line of dingy white buildings, capped by broken and sun-burned rows of lopsided roof tiles. Even so, these buildings seemed the most elegant in town, except for the expansive structures clustered behind a green-brown terrace supporting a tall standard from which flew the flag of England, the burgee of the South Atlantic Naval Command, and two scarlet pennants not identifiable by Silas.

The remainder of the city was an insane checkerboard of walled compounds, each surrounding huts and houses and unbeautiful nearly square buildings. The spires, thin and insipid, of several churches spiked the sterile vista. One such edifice seemed more substantial than the others and Silas, raised a Catholic, crossed himself in proper reverence.

'It looks, my dear, like a most promising land,' he said to Belle. 'Seems a mite sick to me,' she told him. 'This where all them free niggers is?'

'This is Freetown,' Silas said stiffly. 'It is here that the British bring all of the slaves taken from slave ships that are captured. Here, they learn to read and write and worship the true God, so that they may return to their tribal villages to enlighten their

people. And, Belle, my darling, they are Negroes, not niggers! You must remember that.'

But to say this, he had not turned, so he could not see how her face again went flat and devoid of expression. He waited impatiently for the longboat to be shipped and brought alongside. Two of his bags and one of Belle's was put aboard, then with some haste, they loaded into the Longboat. He wanted desperately to ask some questions of Captain Nello, but the master of the brig seemed grumpily busy threading through the few small craft between the *Grenita* and the short wharves along the beach. For a moment, Silas felt slightly out of place; the longboat was shockingly neat and the *Grenita* was far too petite for the motley anchorage.

The red-tiled structures behind the warehouses and trading establishments turned out to be saloons, brothels and gambling houses and in disgust, Silas forged on toward the compound where he had seen the spire of the cathedral. Belle followed, and behind her, two seamen carrying the luggage. Unconsciously, arrogance straightened Silas' back, and his small caravan quickly assumed his sternness as protection. Freetown smelled of Negroes, mules, and mold. The streets were thickly salted with citizens, a few whites, many blacks, and endless hordes of indiscriminately hued children.

All were curious, chattering and dirty. The sun blazed down, the street dust coiled upward, and the odors varied as certain mat-shrouded buildings were passed. Fifty or sixty yards away lay one of the deepest harbors in the world; Freetown seemed utterly devoid of fresh water or any means of securing any.

'I be tired, man,' Belle said abruptly.

'It is only a bit farther. I see the compound gates ahead.'

The gates were closed and locked, but through one, a lopsided door was cut. Silas tried it and discovered it was not secured. He stepped through into the courtyard, disagreeably shocked by the decrepit condition of the cathedral front. The spire that had seemed so beautiful from the deck of the *Grenita* was cracked and weed-grown. The cross topping the spire was giltless and weather-beaten and neglectfully crooked on its sandstone base.

On each side of the cathedral portals Negro beggars clustered hands swiftly outstretched to the affluent looking pilgrims. They moaned and mumbled in bush dialects, boney hands and emaciated arms clutching. By habit, Silas ignored them as typical of the beggars he had seen at cathedral gates in Havana and Madrid.

He led his woman and the luggage carriers into the foyer without knowing the grimaces of pain turned to scowls of hate. He did not see.

It had once been Gothic, but time and the disease of poverty had reduced its obvious ecclesiastical importance to a state of disrepair. There were left barely a half dozen pews under the shadow of the hungrily appointed altar. These were scarred and unvarnished, matching the altar railing and the splintered genuflection piece. The pedestal supporting the Holy Water font was tipsy and the bowl was dry. Startled by such impoverishment, Silas hesitated, unsure of what to do. It was then he saw the priest coming from some antechambers to the right. The holy man's robes were threadbare, his habit was only theological because of his reversed collar and the small unpressed cap he wore. He was very black.

He raised a gnarled hand in blessing as he advanced; Silas, a weakly defined Catholic at best, made no effort to dramatize what ought to have been a most sombre occasion. He stood quietly, fighting spiritual revulsion and a strong physical urge to vomit. He told himself that he did not mind the priest being a Negro had he only afforded his habit some dignity and the holiness of the edifice some accord. He nodded.

'I am Silas King, of Havana, Father,' he said. 'This is Miss Merver, of Boston, the United States, and our companion is Seaman Grundy, of the brig, *Grenita*.'

It came off badly because when he turned to acknowledge Grundy, he discovered the seaman had remained at the foyer entrance, having placed the luggage inside the doors out of reach of the assemblage of beggars.

'La' bless 'oo,' the priest mumbled, crossing himself with an outward, unprecise gesture of his fingers. He added two or three short sentences in African dialect which Silas had no way of understanding. When the muttering stopped, Silas felt disposed to settle some matters with dispatch. His words were almost dramatic.

'Father, I have come halfway around the world in pursuit of honesty. I am a confirmed abolitionist, having spent my youth living among black people who were locked completely in the world of involuntary servitude. I have been led to believe that Sierra Leone is the proper place to begin a spiritual revolution in the black man's soul. Catholic by birth, I have come to your parish in hope that we may work shoulder to shoulder to eradicate the Negroes' unwillingness to fight the steel and shame of slavery!'

The priest blinked, then his heavy lips showed saliva as he again spoke in dialect only lightly sprinkled with badly pronounced holy words in English. It occurred to Silas that this man of God, obviously in charge of what had once been a mighty cathedral, could not speak English past reciting certain memorized references to a God he could not understand. No Spanish nor any other European accent tainted his dialect. He smiled briefly and unconvincingly during his short speech, but it was obvious that he was not a man of mirth.

A painful chill settled over Silas. For the moment, he saw himself in a very agonizing light. He was at the end of a four thousand mile voyage, made in a very genuine effort to right what he knew to be a mortal wrong. He stood now, face to face with a man who should have become enthusiastically approving. Instead, the priest mumbled inanities in a jungle tongue, making no apologies for the disrepair of his church nor the poverty of his introduction. It seemed to Silas that he could have just as easily spoken his introduction to the waterless holy font, or to the scarred and noseless image of the Holy Virgin, smirking from a niche behind the altar.

He turned and beckoned arbitrarily to Belle. He did not even say goodbye to the Priest, nor did he make any pretense of genuflection as he left the presumably holy chambers.

'Whooie,' Belle muttered as they left, and because it seemed to adequately express his confusion and disgust, he did not offer to augment nor diminish the breath of disrespect.

At a considerably reduced pace, Silas spent several days learning about Freetown, its people and its peculiar state of disorganization. He became solidly acquainted with the massive walls that separated the mental camps of Freetown's motley population. Campbell Town was entirely black, a random mixture of blacks recaptured from slavers, enticed into Freetown by the aura of trade and the white man's prosperity, and those frightened into civilization by the constant tribal wars that afflicted the hinterlands. Campbell Town was unfriendly to whites and Silas on a dozen occasions was reminded that his skin was white.

A second section of Freetown not overly conducive to nervous ease was that occupied by the British navy. The Admiralty grounds bristled with pomposity, with pseudo morality and the almost universal unfriendliness military reserves had always shown for civilians. With this was the disregard British naval officers had for indigent psalm sayers and do-gooders.

It did not matter that the British anti-slave patrols were os-

tensibly devoted to the same abolitionism Silas revered, nor that their punishment for transgression was invariably death for the slaver captains.

There seemed a distinct line of endeavor between their anti-slave running activities and the few bible pounding societies that virtually controlled the social temper of the colony. Prime among these societies was a voluble group known as the Methodist Mission of Sierra Leone. This moderately impoverished society was made up of Freetown's almost elite. Merchants, traders, craftsmen and sundry, in attendance with their long-faced nearly Bostonian wives, met for prayer two or three times a week, and gathered to discuss the latest atrocities reported by runaway or recaptured slaves, and devoutly dispensed their physical assistance, soup, clothing and occasionally, medicine with inspired holiness.

After four days of controlled despair, Silas King discovered their leader, a kindly, mutton-chopped Englishman by the name of Jonathan Herresford.

Silas afforded the aging farmer his share of skepticism, then joined the elderly man in righteous enthusiasm.

'I am happy to be here,' Silas told the Methodist leader. 'It gives me great pleasure to at last join forces with a society dedicated to what I feel to be the basic evils of slavery! You see, I have known for many years that the real trouble lay not in the cruelties and indignities directed toward the black man, but in the unwillingness of the white man to grant his unfortunate brother the right of personal decision. While I supported their systems, I privately lamented for a long time, the unfeeling political attitude of the American abolitionists. To me, it was not enough to strike away a slave's shackles with a legal determination that this circumstance or that one nullified a master's claim to a slave! I doubted from birth the right of one man to barter the life of a black man on the scales of justice, which were obviously influenced by gold and material gain.'

'Yes,' Jonathan Herresford said. 'I can see, bless you, that the true spirit of a just man fills your heart. I could never suspect that you are half Spanish, as you have said. Your philosophies are English, bless them! Just such convictions established this mission some twenty years ago. Every day, learned and enthusiastic men from every section of the civilized world join our forces here, to assist our efforts in returning the bush nig - bushman to his tribal origins better equipped to face the rigors of a primitive land. We have failures, of course, but we believe these failures are due to

our inability to reach the African's ingrained fear of freedom.'

'The African is afraid of freedom?' Silas asked, surprised.

'As we understand the word, yes,' Herresford replied in his Essex accent. 'Any black man who arrives in Freetown does so after many tribulations. Most of them are from some remote hill country, brought here by the British as rescued slaves. A few more gravitate to us because of tribal wars or pure hunger, brought on by drought or crop failure in the hinterlands. Some come voluntarily, inspired only by a desire to reap the profits of the white man's generosity. Often it is difficult to establish precisely the motives behind a black man's migrancy, but to us, this is less important than accomplishing his salvation in the name of the Lord.'

Silas considered this. They sat in the office reserved for Herresford as the leader of the Methodist Mission. It was one of three cubicles to the rear of the mission proper, where crude benches and wobbly tables identified the mission service. Two windowless antechambers held clothes and implements, some calculated to till the hard earth of Sierra Leone, others shaped to trowel the poorly mixed plaster and drill the gnarled wooden doors and casings of thatched roof houses to be built as the mission expanded its influence. All was poor, dusty, and inefficient to see, but there was at least, some indication that the Methodist Mission had a purpose.

Outside the office, he could hear voices, mostly occupied with unintelligible African dialects into which certain standard theological words had been introduced. 'Ahmens' and 'P'aise Gowds' were plentiful. Silas felt very close to the origins of slavery.

'What is your current program, Mr. Herresford?' he asked.

'Program?' Herresford nearly chuckled. 'Dear Mr. King. I am not entirely sure you understand the nature of our - physical problems! As you may readily note, we do not have a great deal of money. We receive a most moderate stipend from Methodist organizations in England, a few in Holland and even less from America. The bulk of the food and clothing we dispense is furnished by local people, farmers, merchants and traders. Our program, I suppose, has grown repetitious by long usage! There is little we can do except stand as a solid, prayerful bulwark between starving Negroes and some form of liberation. Fortunately, most of our subjects are from the bush countries and have no measuring stick of expectation! They are satisfied with what we are able to provide.'

Suddenly ashamed of his fine clothing and expensive accoutre-

ments, Silas placed a comforting hand on Herresford's arm.

'Without wishing to seem arrogant, Mr. Herresford, I would like to say that from this day on, money is no longer a problem among the devoted members of your mission. In short, I am very rich and well aware of how valuable a source of financing is to an organization dedicated only to the alleviation of suffering!'

Jonathan Herresford raised his sun-bleached eyebrows. He blinked in surprise, but his English blue eyes were calculatingly brittle. He looked at the scattered papers on his desk, and when Silas also looked, he discovered that many of the foolscap sheets were really hand written bills, for a few pounds in the most drastic cases down to shillings and pence on smudged sheets. He thought fifty British pounds would liquefy them all, but he also recognized the pain they represented to Jonathan Herresford.

'God bless you,' Herresford murmured. 'The thought of having capital, of being able to face our indebtedness is almost too much! The Lord has surely seen fit to succor us, this day!'

'Surely, you have long nurtured some positive program of action calculated to surmount all difficulties, were it financially possible to put it into reality,' Silas said, suddenly feeling pleased with himself. 'Now, I assure you, that your most expansive hopes are feasible, Mr. Herresford!'

Herresford turned and again surveyed him with the brittle eyes, but Silas was too exuberant to notice a small, deeply buried difference in the reflected sparkle. They sat for another half hour, discussing Freetown's part in the growing abolitionist movement, and Silas had no way of knowing fact from fancy.

Belle sat quietly, firstly because she was waiting for her man to conclude his conversation with the stooped old man in the back room of the mission, and secondly because she understood not a word said by the four or five black girls in the large meeting chamber, and thirdly, because she hated niggers and nothing in four days of Sierra Leone, and specifically, Freetown, had changed her mind.

The temperature within the Methodist hall was murderous. The mud and plaster building seemed like an oven, and the residual odors of mold and fungus and fetid jungle made the heat nearly a physical thing against the brown of her skin. Sweat salt burned her eyes and gave her lips, constantly dry, a peculiar flavor. The dress she wore had long lost its shape to the ravages of perspiration.

Three of the black women were naked to the waist, their hips and crooked legs obscured by the drooping swath of faded Man-

chester cloth. All wore their wool in masses, shapeless and with no attempt to form something compatible with their bodies. The two wearing mission gowns of loosely stitched gingham had the squareness of thin shoulders similar to the trio sans upper covering. The five shared an emaciated look, their faces showed a tribal similarity. Foreheads were narrow and strongly sloped. Hardly any nose bridge emphasized the breadth of flared nostrils. No blacks Belle had ever seen had possessed mouths so huge and thick-lipped, nor so devoid of character.

They did simple things, making much ado about folding shapeless bits of cloth, placing earthen pots here to later move them there when the portly white woman in command pointed or chanced a few words in African. Belle was sure they were as warm as she, yet none of the five seemed moist with perspiration. Their broad bare feet with the protruding heels actually raised little puffs of dust as they flapped around the roughly tiled floor. Only her eyes acknowledged them; she was as indifferent to their chattering and pseudo-occupation as if they had been made of green rock. She had no intention of having sympathy, truck nor head misery over five African niggers, female or not.

Regardless of what she proposed to do, Belle was not sophisticated enough to be completely honest, with herself nor her surroundings. And those surroundings were violent, regardless of their listless façade. Ostensibly, she sat aloof and somehow separated from their existence, but Belle saw the five colored girls, the portly white woman and the utter poverty of the hall. The girls were ex-slaves, like herself. They were colored, more deeply black than herself, but with the same kind of blood. They were ugly and misshapen, and so, remote from her world. She found consistent pleasure in itemizing the differences between these mission wards and herself.

Presently, Silas would emerge from his seemingly important conference with the boss man. He would be tall, handsome and finely dressed. He was rich and worldly and inspired by principles, if strange, and Belle had learned many weeks before how to control his private moments.

Not once did she consider herself lucky; what she possessed she felt was her due, and with this arrogance, she had begun to do some thinking, which to her seemed very astute. It seemed wise to her to formulate some private plan to remove herself and Silas from the influence of Sierra Leone. There was not quite enough space between herself and the five stupid bush girls who flapped about the decrepit mission.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Freetown turned out en masse. Mouth to mouth telegraphy had brought news that the British Gulf of Guinea patrol had passed the beacon on Cape Sierra Leone with guns bristling to cover a shot-scarred schooner, loaded with slaves fresh from the factories along the north Congo coast. Captured slavers excited Freetown. The significance of a captured vessel was multitudinous. Of prime importance was the bonus in pounds and shillings paid the British sailors for having secured a prize.

Significant to the economy of Freetown was the amount of Admiralty gold that would be spent to feed and clothe the recaptured blacks while the matter of dispensation was settled. There would be accelerated trade among the hostleries, vying for British largesse in the matter of housing the freed slaves. In general, the morale of Freetown would energize because it existed on the military and the concept of freed slaves, and a fresh schooner load of Negroes, no matter their fright and confusion and jungle manners promised variety.

A number of strong civic elements became alert at once.

The black pimps and whore mongers of Campbell Town eyed the schooner's laden decks with calculating eyes, knowing well that few slave cargoes were without lush belles and indifferent maidens. That they spoke no Caucasian language was unimportant. Once herded into the pens and ill smelling quarters of the brothel area, they could be induced to provide sexual services by the display of gold and temper; confusion would nullify their nearly nonexistent jungle morals and wine would temper their private misgivings.

Every anti-slavery society in Freetown was represented along the beach by at least two or more stern faced members. Some mumbled prayers, others offered thanks to God, not that a sizable number of blacks had been saved from the cruelties and degradations of slavery, but that a small measure of affluence was promised shortly.

By 1842, the British had become conscious of the trap into which they had fallen. Dedicated to the theory of ending the horrendous traffic in African slaves, the British had come face to face with secondary problems, arising from their official vigilance. It had earlier become evident that some form of subsidy was necessary

to alleviate the physical problem of releasing three or four and sometimes five hundred, illiterate, hungry and unhappy Negroes upon Freetown. Tribal hatreds which erupted into bloody encounters once the slave ship shackles were removed from black wrists and ankles were serious enough; an equal number of adult Negroes turned loose in a settlement of Freetown's size and opulence was almost disastrous. Desperate, the Admiralty had pressed the English Parliament for relief, and it had eventually been passed into law. With every captured slave absorbed by the impoverished anti-slave societies went a solid British pound to ease the matters of food and housing.

The British frigates had hardly lost seaway in the military anchorage before the shoreline was informed that the schooner had been loaded with three hundred and seventy-six slaves, forty-two of whom were Congo women, twenty-three were black children between the ages of eleven and fourteen. These children, considered adults by the Admiralty as well as the captured slavers, brought full stipend from the Government. To Freetown, the prospect of three hundred and seventy-six pounds in sudden revenue was a joyous occasion. The single problem among the society members was how to have a reasonable number of the recaptured slaves allocated to their varied control.

Silas stood on the dusty road, listening avidly to the words that came softly from Jonathan Herresford's cautious lips. He followed the stubby forefinger Herresford used to delineate the eventual anchorage, the military disembarking piers and the sprawling barracks where the slaves would be housed until the military tribunal and the colony judges would release them to Freetown's benevolence. The harbor seemed unduly busy because certain bumboat operators, already aware that the naval crews were counting the bonus money in advance, had mingled with the gleaming white longboats of the Admiralty officials. Several Admiralty commissions were represented from the shore. A captured slaver set many ponderous wheels in motion.

'We will be host to perhaps a round hundred, Mr. King. This number will tax our reserves and our facilities, and it represents the maximum bid the Methodist Mission is able to make to the chief officer of the Dispersal Commission. Fifteen pounds is not an easy sum to produce from our meager coffers!'

'I beg your pardon?' Silas said with a frown.

'Indeed. You see, Mr. King, a round hundred freed slaves invoices to a round hundred British pounds, paid by the Admiralty to whomever assumes the responsibility for the recaptured slave's

welfare. A sizable sum, really, and we are not adverse to sharing a bit of it with appreciative officials!

Silas looked at the motley collection of people, mostly black, who lined the west shore of the river. Many were bearded and dirty. Even the white men had about them the look of derelicts. He did not see the priest, nor any other representative of the Catholic parish. The stench of corruption was added to the natural odor of dust and heat and unwashed bodies. He was suddenly glad that Belle had stayed aboard the *Grenita*, and that no other member of the brig's crew had accompanied him to the Methodist Mission. The feeling he had of being confidentially advised by Herresford was oddly mingled with anger and shame at such a confidence. Here, responsible men were concerned with fifteen pounds, less than a hundred totally, of which he was now sure a few would find their way into funds created for something more than buying food and clothing for freed slaves. Much of his displeasure was due to the fact that his wallet, snugged damply into the inner pocket of his tropic weight coat, contained long undisturbed British notes exceeding five hundred pounds in value.

He fell silent, watching with the others as the frigates with their forlorn prey between them, moved up the harbor toward the naval anchorage. The schooner from that distance had the look of a mother duck about it. Long-boats from the Admiralty dock had reached her, and the white lapstrakes were being towed from lines put aboard the vessel. On the deck, white uniforms mingled with naked black skins as the officers counted and made rough attempts to sort the ex-slaves by tribe and jungle origin.

'When will our hundred wards make their appearance, Mr. Herresford?' he asked.

'Two days, perhaps three at best. Ample time for us to make concentrated efforts to accommodate them when they do appear. We have rice and corn. It will be necessary to purchase vegetables and meat so that their poor emaciated bodies receive adequate strength for the vicissitudes ahead. A glorious work, Mr. King. One to make a man's heart sing with gratitude that the Lord has blessed him with understanding and sympathy!'

'Do we have housing, a place for them to sleep and attend their physical necessities?'

'Oh. They will spend several days in the mission, until we are able to provide a destiny for them. We have pads for the floor and crockery for the dispensation of food. Our people will rally in enthusiasm to the succor of the unfortunates. Mr. King, I doubt that you will have ever witnessed such dedication as you

will find among the members of our humble mission!"

"I am, indeed, anxious to witness this devotion," Silas replied. "Shall we return to the hall and advise the – staff of what to expect?"

Herresford turned heavily and put one hand under Silas' arm, guiding him through the crowd, beginning to disperse, and along the rutted road paralleling the harbor edge. He seemed indifferent to the black and white horde, which seemed to Silas larger than it was because of its unpatterned exodus.

"The staff, as you so aptly put it, has been aware of the potential burden of a hundred slaves since we were," Herresford said. "They received the word when I dispatched a man to the Admiralty grounds with the fifteen pounds. We are better organized, Mr. King, than first appearances might indicate!"

Back aboard the *Grenita*, Silas bathed with genuine relief. The water from the midship reservoirs was almost too warm for comfort; he salved this condition by large and hastily consumed gulps of bitter rum. It was approaching dusk because it was after six and the tropic autumn had shortened the days by extending the normally brief twilights. He liked the sound of a live brig, the clump of deckhands' feet, the click and rasp of brass catches on companionway doors. Even the creaks and grunts of the masts and spars was pleasant. He refilled his Spanish-glass rum mug.

He was particularly proud of the fine ruffled shirt he donned, and he relished the snugness of the trousers as they fitted to his muscular thighs. Clocked hose of oriental silk made his hand fashioned boots seem soft as suede. When it came time to transfer his person to the fresh clothing, he felt no regret at the lightness of his wallet. It had seemed to Silas that no slave could be properly accommodated for less than five pounds per slave, and he had unblushingly impressed five hundred pounds upon Jonathan Herresford before they had parted in the dingy offices of the Methodist Mission, leaving the society administrator in a state of shock.

He deliberately avoided some of the conclusions this day's events had fostered. Rum helped scatter his most vicious thoughts; he forgave Herresford, even the entire settlement of Freetown, the stigma of apparent greed. The blistering colony on the shores of the murky Sierra Leone had existed through half a hundred years of very real hazards, beginning with the sincere but ill begotten dreams of Henery Smeathman, and swiftly followed by all the tribulations of a weak settlement, located in the deadly

heat of western Africa amid the furies of warring jungle tribes. Fear and disappointment had tempered the white settlers, the British anti-slave flotillas had taught it corruption and avarice. To Silas, it was an unreal land, responding to adversity with the only weapons it understood.

Rising to the *Grenita's* deck, with difficulty because of the rum glass in his left hand, he thought of Freetown as some mystic geographical place completely remote from his world. Only when he reached the quarterdeck, where Belle sat languidly in one of the canvas back chairs, did the brutally slanting sun and the heavy humidity remind him that Freetown was very real. He countered this by drinking deeply and smiling lewdly at his mulatto woman.

'Sho hot,' she said smiling broadly to tinge her agony with beauty. 'How long we goin't to stay here, Silas?'

He sank gratefully into the second chair, bolted a few feet from hers. He slid low, sending his long legs out in a careless slouch. He drank again, peering at her over the tipped mug. She was beautiful and her lush body quieted his original agitations with a blanket of more acceptable disturbances. He controlled the urge to say they were sailing immediately, and he deliberately misinterpreted her question.

'I had thought of seeking anchorage closer to the Methodist Mission,' he said, '— but there is always the matter of adequate moorage for the longboat, darling. It may become necessary, however. In two or three days, Mr. Herresford anticipates a hundred Negroes, our share of the recaptured slaves from the slave schooner. At that time, my presence will be required, for we are all dedicated to the physical well being of the unfortunate Negroes. I advanced Mr. Herresford money to assist their monumental tasks.'

'How much money?' Belle asked tersely.

He looked at her quizzically, never having had a query from her respecting how much money anything cost. The rum eased his pique. 'Five hundred pounds,' he said.

Her lower lip went slack. He thought her face darkened but it was only because of the horrified expression that twisted her eyes and cheeks. She sucked in a great breath, leaning forward as if pushed. 'F-five hun'ed poun's?' she gasped. Then she seemed to age. 'You gave that foolish old man five hun'ed poun's? Why, him and them niggers girls and that fat ol' woman in that busted down mission ain't worth five hun'ed poun's! They all ain't nothin' but po' trash, leachin' on ever'body an' each other, eatin'

rotten rice an' wearin' cast off rags when they can fin' 'em. Silas, honey, you didn't!

He chuckled drunkenly, amused by her vehemence, her concern over what was really a nominal sum to him, and by her unusual verbosity. The small anger he felt he drowned in rum. He didn't express any displeasure because what she had said corresponded with a well-stilled sense of personal guilt he did not want to acknowledge. In the end, he burped heavily and shrugged.

'Matter of no importance,' he said. 'Money is 'portant here. *Dinero es importante, aqui, querida,*' he added in Spanish to lend emphasis to what seemed an inadequate assessment of fact.

'It sho is!' Belle snapped. 'They ain't five hun'ed poun's in the whole g'dam town! less'n them hookers down in Cam'el Town do better'n I think!'

'You seem excited,' Silas managed to say without lisping.

'Sho 'nuff! When we goin' to get shut of this here place?'

He blinked. 'Leave Freetown?'

She seemed to take a second to weigh her response. 'Nothin' here fo' you, Silas,' she finally said, her voice low and intense. 'Jes' hot an' stinky an' thievin'. I listen' a hun'ed times to you talk about how you feels toward niggers. Silas, you ain't never seen no niggers like these here! Me neither! They don' know nothin' and can't learn nothin'! Where you been fo' two weeks? Listenin' to that trashy ol' man who ain't change his shirt since we come? He goin' take yore five hun'ed poun's and git himself drunk and fix up in Cam'el Town, that's what he goin' do! Them pore dumb niggers on that ship today. They ain't goin' see t'pence of yore money! Silas, whyn't we go along home?'

Blearily, he looked around the deck of the *Grenita*. Forward, four seamen were struggling with some task involved with a roll of sailcloth. Behind him, a seaman burnished the brass binnacle with some vigor, and the watch officer seemed occupied with a folded chart supported on the taffrail. By standards he had learned to associate with life aboard the brig, he and Belle were supremely alone. She shared this peculiar sense of isolation only because he had also learned that no matter the moment, he would end up in her arms, monstrously comforted from any worry he generated. Now, her plea echoed in his mind, and he shrouded it with a few remembered words from the long anger she had displayed. He looked toward shore, able to make out only the tiled roof line of the Methodist Mission. It seemed very poor and very far away. He took another deep draft from the rum mug.

Between the mission roof and the waterfront emporiums, now

mostly closed, were the tiled edges of the brothels of Campbell Town. They had stood as prohibited symbols of lust and degradation throughout the two weeks the *Grenita* had been anchored offshore. Sober, he would have scorned them as poor substitutes for the private staterooms below, just as he would have scorned the denizens as raucous facsimiles of femininity. Rum cast a thick curtain of illogic over the whole. He gulped the last of his drink and lunged to his feet. He inhaled painfully, then rubbed his bloated gullet. With unreasonable firmness, he strode to the bulwark and climbed drunkenly overboard. His boots banged loudly into the midsection of the longboat and he staggered back, sinking to a seat on the stern thwarts. After a moment, he was joined by a pair of surly seamen who immediately moved to rowing positions on midboat thwarts.

'Shore,' Silas muttered. 'Got business to aten'to!'

'Aye-aye, sir,' one of the oarsmen offered.

Silas thought, 'aye-aye, you are goddamned right because I am Silas King and I own the goddamned brig, and you too!' He lapsed into a drunken silence as the longboat moved toward the decrepit landing wharf.

The saloons and gaming houses with their attached brothels that lay along Freetown's second thoroughfare were not part of Campbell Town. When Artemus Campbell came to Freetown in 1783 the ulcer had just begun to form. He went east of the small settlement, not yet a Crown colony, and walled off a substantial section of the arid earth. Then with money and ambition and Scottish determination, he dug a deep well and erected a few substantial buildings, mostly houses to accommodate the considerable clan he had brought from Edinburgh. He was a Presbyterian with strong anti-slavery sentiments, in those years a monumental affront to the powers that were. Even England believed in the principle of economic conquest through the labor of slaves.

Campbell failed miserably but in the nine years before his death by fever in 1792, he had left his mark. Campbell Town had grown, largely swelled by the innumerable Negroes the old warrior brought to his compound and installed as freemen. Within a year or two of his demise, the remaining white settlers moved to more compatible areas. The abandoned Africans sought economic stability by crowding the area with more blacks, and in twenty years, Campbell Town was totally black. It existed with the alchemy of mutual misery. It did not know any degree of prosperity until the huge harbor at the mouth of the Sierra Leone was taken over by the British Admiralty and the curtailment and eventual end

to the business of running slaves from Africa to the industrial and agricultural centers of the world.

By 1807, the pattern was set. The British sailors, and later, the citizens of Freetown, sought feminine companionship, a product well understood by the denizens of Campbell Town. Black children were deliberately bred, hopefully to be girls, comely and lush who might inveigle pence and shillings from the lusty customers. To ease this situation, the ambitious members of Campbell Town's pandering society cast calculating eyes past the assault gates of the compound. Eventually, they braved the streets of Freetown, content to bask behind or beside the gambling dens and liquor emporiums flourishing only a breath behind the waterfront.

It was into this organized holocaust that Silas stumbled. Renfro Street was not a beehive of activity at seven in the evening. The settling darkness masked much of the disrepair and gave the few plastered buildings a sickly whiteness that was really a dull gray-brown in full light. Many of the bistros were nothing more than cubicles made of palm fronds and thin bamboo poles, lashed into position by ragged weeds and weary vines. Here and there, uniformed sailors slipped between structures, to venture into the rotting structures behind the tumbling buildings fronting the street. Some were gay, some were morose. Heat and cheap liquor had stripped them all of naval glamour. At that hour, they were hardly amorous but the rules were clearly defined. From now until some later time, the game was verbal with only crude manifestations of the lust to come. Men bartered and haggled and did lewd things with swiftly darting hands, and eventually, they sought new girls with which to dally and exchange obscene witticisms.

Silas understood none of this. He strode along the dusty street, drunkenly pleased by the fact that no one paid any attention to his passing. His gleaming white shirt with the fancy ruffles drew no eyes, and his precisely fitted trousers and fine boots could have been as sloppy and worn as those of any Freetown citizen.

The excitement of adventuring sobered him slightly. He peered into sour saloons and chanced one for a watered rum. At the end of a deep breath, he chose a dark alleyway. He felt remarkably at ease feeling his way toward a rectangle of sky-gray. There he stooped and stared at the several reed huts, each made curiously attractive by the black girl slouched in the low, lopsided door. Their smiles were pinched and the movements they showed him were strictly professional. He waited but none approached

him with more than brash words and sexually adept wriggings.

One seemed more appealing than the others and he let his eyes burn her pulpy breasts and lightly clad hips with intention. As he moved to her, she held out both hands, fingers curling with lewd suggestion.

She stank of palm oil sex, and as he closed with her, nothing else seemed important. He gave her a pound note instead of the three shillings she asked for and he performed with considerably less talent than he thought he usually did. It wasn't until sometime later that he discovered that the ridges on her cool, animated flesh were really purple tattoos.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She had wanted him to leave the brothel compound by a twisted doorway at the rear of the hutted area and he had been too drunk to argue. Now he stood amid what seemed to be endless thickets, lined by well trodden paths that showed side trails to the rear of several other brothels. It was dark, the semirugged terrain lighted only by a beginning moon and a million super bright stars in the cloudless sky. Silas rubbed his forehead to dispel a thundering ache and by instinct alone, chose to turn east into the rising moon.

How far he stumbled or how he managed, he did not know, but he had skirted two or three small thatched roof houses when the path before him seemed blocked. He swayed a minute, trying to clear his vision so that he could make something of the blockage other than a sprawled body. It did not change in shape, and as the shock of what he had encountered registered in his foggy brain, it became less addled. The body was male, thickly built and clad in rough clothing.

Not a young man by the tangle of grayed hair, nor had he been very neat before the killer had disheveled the tweed trousers and the London coat. Then Silas blinked and gasped for breath.

The dead man was Jonathan Herresford. Silas pronounced him dead because blood still oozed from the gaping wound in the weathered neck. It was a deep wound, not overly broad nor ragged. An experienced man would have said that the killer had simply plunged a knife into the jugular vein of the Methodist

administrator; Silas controlled the urge to vomit and stood hunched over the body of a man he had considered a friend.

From Renfro Street and the waterfront came sounds, of merriment, of the stress of humanity coming to life in the degree or so cooler air of the night. Along the row of irregular fences closing the brothels and saloons, not a sign of humanity was visible. Weak, Silas knelt, and it was then he saw how thoroughly Herresford's clothes had been ransacked.

An instant sense of guilt crushed Silas; only hours before, he had given Herresford five hundred British pounds, for which he had obviously been murdered. He did not think to wonder why the portly man had died in the rear of Freetown's whore section, nor did he question the stink of watered rum that arose from the disturbed clothing. With futile fingers he touched Herresford's face and found that death had already begun to chill the once florid skin. To Silas, this meant that the murderer was already safe in whatever lair he inhabited.

Stunned, Silas fought diligently for logic. Herresford was dead and whatever money he had had on his person was obviously gone; he could have been carrying the entire five hundred pounds, or merely the portion of it he had decided was for himself. In either case, it was gone, and with it, a strong man who had seemed completely able in his own way.

Abruptly, Silas remembered where he was. The idea of kneeling over a dead man, one murdered by a knife in the throat, behind a row of whorehouses unequalled in his memory of foul establishments, in a west African colony renowned for its extremes, seemed almost convicting in its starkness. Without knowing, he was sure that all law in Freetown was a matter of military enforcement; he was Silas King, son of an ex-slaver probably well remembered in Admiralty records, and Jonathan Herresford was an avowed abolitionist. There were no witnesses to condemn him, but there were also none to clear him of guilt. He had no way of knowing how many people knew about the five hundred pounds, a sizable amount to any but the most wealthy. He shuddered.

The rum he had consumed lost some of its potency. He stood up, certain that nothing could be done for Jonathan Herresford, but equally sure something could be done for Silas King. Without a backward glance, he turned and found a hazardous route to Renfro Street. He spent a moment repairing his breathlessness, then he spent another orienting himself with the dock where the *Grenita's* longboat would be waiting.

A nearly hairless hungry dog snapped at him as he headed for

the waterfront. He was required to step over two or three naked children who had curled up to sleep in the questionable shelter of a nearly leafless bush. He thought, Nigerian Chinaberry and made mental note of the several months remaining before the rainy season. The sleeping Negro children he ignored as improbable witnesses to anything but hunger. He walked along the eroded beach until he came to the short ramp leading out onto the pier.

'The brig,' he said, slipping down into the longboat's stern.

'Aye-aye, sir,' one of the aroused seamen agreed.

Sulking with sudden distress, Silas scowled at the two oarsmen, and it took all of his waning determination not to be sick before the small boat reached the *Grenita's* gunwales. A third seaman helped him over the bulwark and turned him obligingly toward the quarterdeck hatch.

Safe now, Silas surrendered to the vast quantity of rum he had drunk and vomited copiously over the brig's starboard rail. The sailor on quarterdeck watch seemed oblivious to the owner's illness. Resolutely, he faced the sparsely lighted naval anchorage.

Fouled at nose and mouth, Silas slid down the hatch steps, and he passed out in Belle's arms when he hit the lower deck.

The brig seemed motionless when he awakened. He lay quietly, looking up at the unburdened bunk above. He sensed it was late judging from Belle's empty berth. His head seemed clear, his memory was acute. The night before, he had gotten drunk, went whoring ashore and discovered the body of his friend, Jonathan Herresford, murdered in the netherlands behind the brothels. Murdered and robbed by some villain. Only then did he speculate as to the color of Herresford's assailant, and with no prejudice at all, Silas thought of the knife wielder as being black. But the color of a killer was not his main concern.

The excitement and expectations he had held for the arrival of a hundred ex-slaves was somehow jaded and without meaning. By Herresford's side, he had planned to move and speak with dramatic impact among the newly freed men, who could not help but be both grateful and elated. His dreams had been subconsciously inspired by a deep inner belief that given a chance, no human being, black or white, could fail to see the logic in acquiring a sense of self determination. The time he had spent on the Bensanee River and in Freetown had accustomed him to the primitive manner in which Africans approached most social conditions, but in condescension, he had simplified many of his most potent

arguments for anti-slavery.

The one hundred blacks, fresh from the very real horrors of a slave ship, would be easy to convince, he had thought, and though one hundred percent cooperation was a bit optimistic, he had guessed that fully half of them would turn out to be competent missionaries back among their own tribes.

Now he remembered that the black whore he had so enjoyed the night before had possessed filed teeth and tattoos across her back and belly, and over her forehead. He remembered how forlorn and destroyed Herresford had looked, lying sprawled in death within spitting distance of brothels. There were no slaves in Freetown; a freedman had killed the Methodist missionary. Robbed and killed him with no thought for the damage he did to the cause of Negro freedom, and even less attention to the ecclesiastic and legal laws supporting the white man who was trying to help.

Inner tears of private frustration seeped from secret glands in Silas' being. He sat up on the edge of the berth, allowing his long bare legs to hang and dangle; he felt no curiosity as to how he had been undressed and put to bed and he had no solid memory of having been led into the stateroom. He sat uncomfortably, trying not to remember how many times in a year or two he had found himself hovering between flight and fury.

He reached out and poured a glass full of rum from the berth-side demijohn. He drank strongly, not because his system demanded liquor, but because his brain seemed to work better when his mind acquired that wavery feeling. He took a second gulp, his mouth abruptly free of the leathery dryness he had awakened with.

They had been fools in Boston, mewing about the law and reciting obscure judgments from country courts and inept magistrates. Like mean little revolutionaries, they had contented themselves with assisting runaway slaves and inspiring frightened blacks to meaningless personal revolutions. He remembered distastefully, the long faces, the prayer-mouthings, the sanctimonious rallies and meetings, and he could almost recite the spineless editorials that had graced the front pages of cellar printed periodicals. He granted the Boston abolitionists certain small victories in the courts, but he was unable to think of one favorable decision that had furthered the total cause of the enslaved Negro. He thought of his abdication as a genuine effort to move the truth of abolitionism into the areas where it was paramount.

About his weeks on the Bensanee, Silas had several misgivings.

He excused his failure there on several things, one of them being his naïveté while under the influence of Don Alvarez del Prado. It had been a mistake to so faithfully believe what the financial brain of King-Alvarez had said. The moment one recalled that Alvarez was King-Alvarez, the idea of following his directions in search of fertile ground for anti-slavery teachings seemed ridiculous. Silas prided himself that he had discovered the improbability of success very early. All there had been thoroughly drenched in the greed for gold as it was represented by the buying and selling of their jungle brethren. Male again, he did not credit his dalliance with Elena Priene as a contributing factor to his exodus, even though he had facilitated his escape within hours of her rather disappointing physical retreat.

He sat now, considering where he was. There were no slaves in Freetown and only a few in the hinterlands of Sierra Leone. The British had already purified the area, no matter their tactics. The Negroes in Freetown were poor, but all of Africa was poor. By the time a black man reached Freetown, he was aware, forcefully or pacifically, of the definition of the word freedom. Herresford and the Methodist Mission had served only a secondary purpose, mainly concerned with teaching a freed slave about a new God and the moral benefits of wearing a loin cloth. Any hope that the aided black might return to his tribe with new social inspirations seemed relegated to the small end of the effort.

Silas took another deep draft of rum, pleased by the fire it spread down and around his midsection. There now was the matter of Jonathan Herresford and the Methodist Mission. During the several days he had spent in almost constant companionship with the mission administrator, he had met a number of people, men and women. All had been grim and seemingly dedicated to the service of God, and thusly to the welfare of the suffering African. But he could not now remember any one who had revealed the stature required to take Herresford's place. They were first, citizens. Their days were taken up by the demands of shops and warehouses, by struggling farms in the barely fertile and always hilly lands back and east of Freetown. Most had been Sabbath Soldiers, their attendance to midweek prayer meetings and rallies being a matter of convenience. Jonathan Herresford alone stood as a man totally dedicated to the success of the mission; he had died, Silas thought, debauching on mission funds to which he had every right.

Conditions, reasons, circumstances, but to Silas, warmed by rum and suffering from melancholy, nothing was changed by

them. Herresford was dead, and Herresford had been his one tangible thread leading to the African's dilemma. Silas dressed, draining a second draft of rum in the process.

On deck, he was half blinded by the shock of morning sunlight. He stood for a moment, blinking, first at Belle who slouched prettily in a canvas slingback, then at the helmsman who was occupied with polishing the binnacle, then across the rolling swells toward Freetown. He spoke to no one past a grunt. Captain Nello was in conversation with the boatswain. Silas strode forward and was gratified at the way in which the boatswain touched his forelock and backed away.

'Good morning, Captain Nello,' Silas said, momentarily touched by the memory of how friendly they had once been.

'Good morning, sir,' Nello returned the greeting.

'Captain, prepare the brig for sea. We depart this miserable bay in the morning!'

Nello stared and blinked rhythmically, slowly. 'Yes sir,' he finally murmured. 'Bound for what port, Mr. King?'

For a moment, Silas was nonplussed by the query. He had not gotten around to considering a destination, only an escape. For want of anything more conclusive, he said, 'Why, Havana, captain!'

Nello smiled. 'We are going home!' he said happily.

Silas ventured a half smile. 'A maudlin supposition but a natural one, Captain Nello. There will be no problem?'

Nello chuckled. 'A typhoon or two, bastard British patrols. Three weeks of bully beef and sour bread, but nothing unseasonal! It will be worth it, sir, worth it a hundred times over!'

'I dare say,' Silas muttered unenthusiastically.

He stood before Belle like a conquering hero, legs spread with exaggerated deference for the slow roll of the brig's deck and announced that he had given the vessel's master orders to prepare for the sea on the morning tide. He casually remarked that they were bound for Havana, pearl of Cuba. At first, he didn't think she had understood what he had said, then the lifelessness went out of her molten black eyes and her mouth opened prettily, exposing her large even teeth. She started to laugh, low and with intense but useless control. His groin, significantly responsive with recuperation from the previous night, twitched pleasantly as he savored the minute mobilities her fluid body expended in laughter. To maintain his façade of nonchalance, he swung around and sat down in the chair bolted to the deck at her left. He tried to

catch her odor, black woman puffed with important French powders from Boston's most exclusive shops but the foul of Freetown and stench from the sewage laden river dominated the air.

'Thas good,' she said. 'Is Havana nice, Silas?'

'Very nice,' he said, and was well pleased that he did not seem fatuous. 'Three or four weeks at the most,' he told her.

'You gave up,' her words came as matter-of-factly as if she had been commenting on the weather.

'Indeed not!' he exclaimed, looking at her to make sure she was not being facetious. 'Under the plan I have formulated, it simply seems expedient that Havana be visited. Havana, you know, is the Spanish haven for slavers. Most of the American slaves have come from Havana. Even more than Africa, it is the source of consummate evil and degradation to the black man! Why, nearly every ex-slave I came across in New England knew a few words of Spanish from their sojourn in the hideous slave pits of Havana!'

'My mama from V'ginny,' Belle reminded him.

'You will learn Spanish easily - I shall be a good teacher,' he said with confidence.

'Nobody speaks English?' she demanded. 'Mr. Alvarez and yore step mammy spoke English.'

He felt very serious so he explained that educated Cubans often studied many languages in schools and at the hands of tutors. While he dealt academically with his native land, he was surprised by the growth of enthusiasm in his words. Each new revelation to Belle began a series of vivid mental pictures, and his recitations continued to extend. Below them, the deck of the *Grenita* had come alive with seamen, setting to the task of preparing the brig for a long, admittedly precarious voyage. Deep in dissertation, it was some time before he realized that there was no activity on the quarter deck where they sat under the closely furled spanker. If it was flattering, it was dubiously wise; Silas had become more impatient for departure than for preferential treatment.

'Shall we go below, darling?' he asked of Belle. 'I believe we are in the way of proper preparations for sailing tomorrow.'

'Sho, man!' she exclaimed and came up out of her chair with a nearly snakelike twist of her sensuous body. She stood there, vibrating visibly while he got up. She seemed to wait until he had stepped forward to put her head under the jut of his chin. He could smell her then, and her scent and exuberance added to the

devastating lilt of the splendid body. He pressed her toward the midship hatch with one hand, fingers extended down to feel the movement of her lithe back as she walked.

Later, he lay naked and delightfully debilitated on the rumpled berth, his right arm lying weightily over Belle's bare back, his fingers toying idly with the velvet skin covering her strong deltoid muscle. Animal content soothed him; they had long ago abandoned the kind of lovemaking Belle had disdainfully termed 'farm-folkish', and had advanced gradually into exotic physical extremes, often nearly brutish in nature. Her right breast lying heavily on his chest showed dark places which would have been scarlet tooth marks on lighter skin, and her fingers idling with his relaxed masculinity revived small abrasions and illicitly implanted bruises. The chronometer screwed brassily to the bulkhead proclaimed their hour of passion to be prenoon. Neither of them had ever been able to relate love with time, and this Silas liked.

His head was remarkably clear, his senses acute. He could almost tell what was being done up on deck by the sounds thumping vigorously through the teak planks. He could feel every nerve in his body as a limp cord, and his fingers registered every involuntary quiver of Belle's body.

He remembered that he had had no *desayuno*; rum had begun his day, food could come later. Vivid in his memory were the twinkles and smiles of glee Captain Nello had shown upon being advised of their departure, and their probable destination. These, added to the voluble expressions of pleasure from the black girl in his arms, had convinced Silas that his decisions had been wise ones. But, he now thought, they were not without ramifications.

By African schedules, the day was hardly begun. The *Grenita* required no supervision. Captain Nello was a competent master, and much of what had to be done in preparation for the sea was a weary kind of maintenance against chance discrepancies. Silas was personally concerned with Freetown. Mostly honest with himself, he could not shrug off his shore obligations with the excuse that making ready for sea occupied him too strenuously for consideration of them. He was, he knew, facing the necessity for a decision.

He had not made himself vital to the operation of the mission. One day, he had straightened the tired pages of thirty Greeson Methodist hymnals. Another day he had supervised the sorting of cast off clothing against the mysterious, to the Negro girls, matter

of sizes. On another occasion, he had helped Jonathan Herresford compose a bulletin to be sent to the various farmers who grew coarse provender for the Freetown markets.

Noting the chronometer again, he decided that by now, Jonathan Herresford occupied a position of state on a slab in the mission hall. The blood would have been wished away and the wound stuffed with cotton. He could almost see the feeble attempts at making the old administrator presentable to his Maker. His hair would be brushed, his suit straightened, and with luck, his face would have been relaxed to dispel the grimace of pain and terror Silas remembered. From time to time, indignant and mourning members of the abolitionist cause would appear for prayer and tearful abominations of the foul fiend behind the brutal slaying. It was reasonably doubtful, Silas thought, that any of the mission's supporters would know that the arrival of death had also signalled the departure of five hundred pounds in British bank notes. If Herresford had not been carrying the full amount, the remainder would be found in a drawer of his battered desk and a tinge of joy might pervade the shroud of grief among the mourners. He dwelt for some seconds of thought on the degree of hypocrisy that had to exist among the mission congregation.

These suppositions made it easier for Silas to decide that there was little point in concerning himself with a feeling of moral obligation to visit the Methodist Mission that afternoon.

Freetown and its limping abolition minded populace had existed for many years without Silas King, and he felt that the only member of the Methodist Mission who had really understood his dedication was now dead, and surely consigned to hell for his protestant beliefs.

Supremely relaxed, he toyed with dozing which turned his mind to Cuba and the Hacienda del King. There would be some pleasure, he dreamed, of facing Alvarez with a knowing grimace of disdain for his feeble attempts to confuse his ward about the sensibilities of Africa. They would be talking, man to man, in the huge library opening off the *sala*. Alvarez would be smoking one of his infernal Havana cheroots and they would be drinking fine Cuban rum following a lavish Spanish *cena*.

The thought was pleasing, but it made Silas feel the dryness of his mouth. He disturbed Belle enough to rise to one elbow and reach for the demijohn on the side table. He poured himself an adequate drink, ignoring the warmer dregs of his morning's imbibitions. He felt rather good about everything.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It had not been a strenuous voyage by Middle Passage standards. Only one storm of typhoon strength plagued the *Grenita*, and she was required to heave to only twice to accommodate the search and seizure officers of British patrol ships. The twenty-seven tons of trade goods Captain Nello had suggested as forward ballast was far too sterile to interest the English navy; hides and prime ivory and two bales of dried hog gut for Cuban guitar strings brought only frowns of frustration to the faces of enthusiastic lieutenants.

It had been a bit more troublesome to Silas, because every new day and every untoward moment had provided him with an excuse to tap the cask of American whiskey brought all the way from Boston. He finished nearly every day of the twenty-six day passage in a drink-induced stupor, a condition Belle had learned to accept and utilize, when the opportunity occurred. It had occurred often, sometimes twice or three times a day, generally after the *Grenita* was well into dusk or settling darkness which permitted watch officers and seamen to scuttle in secrecy from stations to where she waited. Always, she wound up nakedly snuggled to Silas, her mind occupied with exhilarating, illicit lusts while he snored drunkenly.

On the afternoon when the *Grenita* rode the easy inshore swell under the long guns and vigilant maritime eyes of the Spanish authorities, the cost of the voyage was readily assessable. Silas slumped in the now familiar quarterdeck chair, his sulk a matter of personal feelings, his face lightly bloated by weeks of addiction to the strong American spirits. At his side, Belle sat in her usual careless way, observing the oncoming Cuba and the busy harbor of Guanabacoa with placid eyes. A few feet away, the second watch quartermaster manipulated the brig's wheel with precise attention to the hard orders from Captain Emanuel Nello, standing spraddle legged aft of the wheel. Occasionally, he snapped orders to the seamen forward to keep the brig in trim against the variable gusts of wind that blew west and north from the city.

Neither Nello nor the helmsman were terribly pleased that the

voyage from Africa was nearly over. Unknown to each other, they had both cavorted with the luscious mulatto sitting forward. Both were certain that once the Kings had disembarked, the cavorting was done. Belle, lately come into a powerful degree of confidence, ignored the men with frustrating content. Her dark eyes were focused upon Cuba, and specifically, the delights of Havana as Silas had often described them in drunken enthusiasm.

As the channel under Morro Castle broadened into Havana Bay, Captain Nello systematically reduced sail, threading the brig through anchorages with exact ease. When the quartermaster heeled the vessel to the west, Silas got up from his chair and stared at the thickly cluttered waterfront along Havana's southerly extreme. He finally saw, among the masts and dangling canvas, the dock sign he sought in company with the brig master.

Thirty minutes later, the brig was nestled against the sturdy dock belonging to the King-Alvarez Company and Silas was nearly home. There remained only the dunnage packed below, a carriage ride through Havana's cobbled streets and out the road to Matanzas, and then the questionable joy of reunion with his stepmother and Don Alvarez del Prado. Inwardly, he felt quivery so he requested a rum from the steward's mate and drank it while details were being attended.

At first he had been surprised and disappointed, then slow blossoming logic penetrated his rum misted senses and he remembered that it was mid-afternoon of Thursday and unless by accident, not a time when Don Alvarez would be at the hacienda. At the same time, he remembered that King-Alvarez had a spacious house in Havana and that his *papacita* often stayed there overnight rather than to make the long carriage ride to the plantation.

Ushered into his own house by a female slave with tendencies toward hysteria, he stood now, morose and uncomfortable, with Belle at his back and his stepmother before him. She too was surprised because he had not bothered to send anyone an advance notice of his arrival. She instantly recognized him, but he watched her face go through several expression changes; doubt first, then astonishment and finally, restrained pleasure.

'Silas! And dear Belle!' she exclaimed, rushing forward with hands outstretched in greeting.

He kissed her smooth white cheek, fighting to restrain more pleasantly intimate memories. Elena made no fatuous moves but turned to greet Belle, with two clutching hands and a voice oil smooth in welcome. She was simply dressed and not tinted by

ribbon rouge nor dusted with powder. He thought she was her usual beautiful self, and he granted her a moment to enthuse over Belle's carefully prepared person. Having had a rum and a half following his first glass aboard the *Grenita*, he waited patiently, quite certain that between his woman and his stepmother, he possessed all the beauty in the world. He disdained looking about the magnificently furnished *sala* because there burned inside his consciousness the fact that it represented the glory of all he held to be despicable.

There was instantly tea from trembling black hands, slave hands, he knew, and the three moved to seat themselves in one of the several furniture groupings in the vaulted and chandeliered room. An inlaid teak coffee table showed a humidor of Havana cigars, a Dresden china figurine in a flowingly flowered dress and a clump of wool spiked by gleaming silver needles. Silas had no idea why the idea of Elena King knitting was funny. Looking at her and listening to her as she entertained Belle, he was rudely reminded that for many years, he had thought of her as an abominable bitch who fornicated with slave bucks and rinsed her mouth with expensive Havana perfumes. The flashing memory made him thirsty and he arose to avail himself of wine from a sideboard decanter. He paid no attention to the moment of silence from Elena and Belle, and he dismissed a startled slave maid with a brusque wave of his left hand. The wine wasn't as strong as the rum had been, but it sufficed. He leaned back against the sideboard and added an inconsequential fact to Belle's description of the passage from Freetown, following two weeks of frustrating non-progress.

'Poor Silas!' Elena gushed. 'I'm sure Don Alvarez would have never let you go had he guessed what troubles you must have had!'

'No troubles, really,' Silas said, and it was a precise description of what he felt was to be expected when he got around to taking his stepmother to bed again. He poured himself more wine.

Don Alvarez del Prado arrived at the hacienda at ten minutes after nine that night. He had received word from Elena King five hours earlier that his ward and his ward's mulatto woman had returned home. His tardiness in responding had been due to two factors; one, a business transaction, received the total blame for his lateness. Always honest with Alvarez, he admitted to himself that under other circumstances, the business transaction could have waited. He was master of King-Alvarez and the haste of business was his choice. The fact was that he dreaded the arrival of Silas, and much of this dread was based upon personal ac-

cusations he could not avoid. Alien to a sense of guilt, he had procrastinated.

To begin with, the timing was wrong. By his most generous computations, Silas and the *Grenita* had left Boston harbor only ninety-three days ago. Subtracting a reasonable time for ocean passages, Silas King could have spent hardly more than thirty days in Africa. In Alvarez' mind, these were too few days to have learned very much, and they were certainly too few to have accomplished any degree of success in the nebulous areas of abolitionism. The only logical assumption was that Silas had confronted an impossible situation, or several, and had come home to lick his wounds. Or to kill the man who had sent him joyfully into an untenable position. Had Silas been Jacob the latter probability would have been positive. Because a massive segment of Silas' character was still to be established, the aging Spaniard had not been too quick to make a decision about what awaited him at the Hacienda del King.

He entered the hacienda foyer nurturing a lifelong philosophy that all conditions of life and death were foreordained. He gave his palma *sombrero* and dust jacket to the waiting slave girl, ignoring her furrowed brow and murmured greeting as reactions expected of a Negro slave following any unprecedented occasion. He was sure Silas was an unprecedented occasion but he didn't realize how unprecedented, nor how occasional, until he entered the *sala*.

Elena and Belle he saw immediately. They sat close on a tufted Napoleon sofa and both turned to face him as he entered the sitting room. For a moment, he was stricken by their similarity. Then he saw Silas, slumped in drunken oblivion a few yards away in a huge Spanish chair. Alvarez needed only one glance to ascertain that Silas was dead drunk. He was far too relaxed and contented to have been lulled to sleep by feminine chatter and when the chatter ceased he showed no sign of revival. Hostlike, he advanced to Belle, smiling broadly.

'My dear Miss Merver,' he said warmly. 'It is so nice that you have come! We had not known -'

She tipped her head to glance at Silas. 'He ain't much for advance news,' she said. 'You shorely looking fine, sir'

'Yes. My health is excellent. And when did you arrive?'

'This aft'noon. Came right here. Reckon Silas was glad to be home, sir. He ain't sick or nothin'. Just a mite too much to drink, maybe.'

'*Muy borracho*,' Elena murmured in Spanish.

Don Alvarez looked again at his ward, and the many thoughts he had seemed largely misgivings. Silas, sober and belligerent was one problem. That he was incapacitated by too much liquor only postponed the inevitable, and perhaps added fresh dangers to sobriety. He stepped over and looked appraisingly down at the lean shape.

'Have him taken upstairs and put to bed,' he said to Elena, and almost as if he had slashed her with a whip, she leaped to her feet and summoned two of the hovering slaves from the hallway. Alvarez lit a Cuban cigar and accepted a goblet of wine from a third slave. Then he sat down across from Belle and began to elicit from her the story of Africa.

Jacob's death had changed little and time had been equally ineffectual. The Hacienda del King had matured with the grace if wealth, adding an ell or two, suffering the tropical growth of shrubs and trees and wearing well its annual coat of Havana whitewash. Behind the high, glass fragmented wall that separated the hacienda terraces from the arid rawness of the land surrounding the lake, and the efficient cane mill, the world of horrible nonentity still existed. To Silas, standing disheveled, his face still flushed with numerous plungings into the porcelain bowl beside the monstrously elegant four-poster bed, the odor of slavery blowing through the arched porticos of the bedroom was somehow different and more personal than the odor of Negro that had been in his nostrils since the *Grenita* had broached the channel on the Bensanee.

His memories were painful. Like the hacienda proper, time had altered few details of the expansive slave quarters. Here and there, new huts altered an old vista. There were also gaps where fire and dry rot had destroyed a poor abode. He even thought he recognized some of the faded cotton brilliants hanging from sagging cords strung from poles and hut corners. The distance from his room window was too great to permit recognition of stooped black figures moving with deadly lethargy through the quarters, but to him, they were suddenly all old friends. He even took a moment to glare at the not-distant punitive stocks, significantly labeled evil by the dangling ropes from the sun-bleached wooden members. He knew without being able to see that the ground around the whipping posts was of different color than the dry red earth of the road passing it. Time and blood and bits of flesh had tinted the dirt a singular shade of gray, a tone that turned nearly black with the application of water.

He cursed and turned waving into oblivion the black maid who

was reforming the big bed. She scuttled out of the bedchamber showing fright, she would think him fierce and cruel. He found the luxuriantly carved door securing the liquor and brightened some at the pleasure of choosing among bottles of rum or brandy for the one he intended sampling. Slightly impressed by the opulence that permitted him to drink two pound brandy in lieu of breakfast, he poured heavily.

Seated on his nearly made bed, he decided home was not the panacea it was reputed to be. By every standard of human condition, he had not a concern in the world. If home were disgusting, it was still home in the most expansive definition of the word. He had never realized how fabulously rich he was until his twenty-one-year-old consciousness compared his welfare with recently met white men. Thinking this, he neglected to compare himself with the black population of either Africa or Cuba. In his subconscious mind, the world of black was uncompromisingly separated from the world of white, not by economics nor politics but by some intangible imbalance not readily understandable.

As a boy, he had been able to retreat from these unfairnesses into tears and melancholy association with those he felt so grievously wronged. It was now unclear and unimportant who sympathized with whom the most effectively, but now he could only remember how dreadful had been the helplessness he had felt in the face of the overwhelming injustice of it all. He sipped the brandy, then drank more deeply. It was not necessary for him to review the paths he had trod in the past two years. Every step was vividly burned into his mind and with typical forthrightness, he excused what seemed to be failures and garnished apparent successes with harmless flourish.

It had been his idea to venture into Africa, but he managed to blame Don Alvarez del Prado for the time wasted on the Bensanee. His journey to Sierra Leone had been genuinely inspired; it had not been due to any failure of his that the British had allowed Freetown to deteriorate, nor had his hand been in any way responsible for Jonathan Herresford's murder. Now, he excused his escape to Cuba as a debt he owed to Belle, to Emanuel Nello, and to other homesick crewmen on the *Grenita*.

He contented himself with rum, and the private determination to continue his private 'crusade' within the geographical areas he knew best. He licked his lips, appreciating the imported rum over the brandy. Deep into his second glass of rum, following one of brandy, he began to see the future more precisely. There was no doubt in his mind that he and he alone, was responsible for the

black man, and subsequently, the demise of slavery. He also thought himself supremely wise to have decided upon the Hacienda del King as the center of his campaign. Aware that advantages were necessary, he could think of no place in the world where he could enjoy more facility than his own home would provide.

Immediately then, he thought of his stepmother, of her calm beauty and furious passions. He recalled also that she was unattached to any loyalty except an exaggerated respect for Alvarez.

He chuckled, his lips abruptly dry. He poured another rum and sat smiling while his mind contrived lewd scenes with Elena.

Don Alvarez finished sorting the invoices and manifests on the big desk, then resurveyed the whole to be sure all was in order. The desk was not his, the cubicle in which it sat was an anteroom in the *Banco de Holanda*, loaned to King-Alvarez and specifically Don Alvarez del Prado as one of the bank's largest customers and Dutch Rudolph's best friend. He stood now, a portly past middle-age man with a fat neck, and eyes gimlet sharp for a thousand details. He didn't like the expression on his friend's face.

They had been friends and associated for more years than either man cared to enumerate. The total of their affairs exceeded ten million American dollars.

'Something?' Joseph Rudolph demanded of Alvarez.

Alvarez raised one of his closely trimmed eyebrows, not realizing his face or manners had revealed any of the consternation he felt. Momentarily, he was prone to shrug away the query as only an evidence of his banker's acumen and curiosity. Then he decided to confess his concerns, conceding that the Dutchman was far too wise to be buffered by small talk.

'Silas is home, Dutch,' he said.

'Ezz so. We sold yesterday to Fregosa the freight from the *Grenita*. Ezz not possible for freight from the *Grenita* without Silas King, zo? He ezz well, my frien'?'

'He hasn't drawn a sober breath in the three days he's been at the hacienda!'

'Africa ezz not paradize,' Rudolph remarked.

Alvarez nodded. 'I know. I spent many years there.'

'Silas ezz not like you.'

'Silas is not like his father, either! Nor like any other man I ever knew! Between rums, he prates endlessly about the down-trodden nigger and the sin of slavery! He even brought a nigger wench to the hacienda! Powdered and perfumed and dressed

like a Boston whore! Jacob would roll over in his grave and vomit if he could see. Ah. I am sorry, *amigo*. You are my banker, not my priest!

'*Ezz verdad*,' Rudolph agreed, mutilating the Spanish pronunciation. 'But *ezz* also an old friend and a Dutchman, a most sensitive combination.'

Alvarez chuckled mirthlessly. 'You haven't been to Holland in forty years.'

Rudolph merely shrugged. 'All right, Ezz merely a friend.'

Through with joviality, Alvarez let his handsome face draw into a wrinkled mask of pain. 'I do not know what to do. Half of my ignorance is selfish. You know how involved I am in the affairs of King-Alvarez. With Jacob, I was younger and we were destined to struggle or die, and Jacob was as aggressive as was I. But I am not not young, Dutch, and my responsibilities are keyed to the song of enterprise, not adventure!' He paused, chuckling again at some privately unfunny thought. 'Adventure? Silas doesn't even know what the word means! It was so even when he was a child!'

'He can not play games like most men?'

'Yes, Dutch, he can. But with Silas it is not fun, nor can he see the humor of anything. He tells with a great frown about the time he was knocked senseless by Captain Nello following an argument about Silas marrying his mulatto wench!'

'Skoal,' Rudolph said, raising an imaginary salute.

'I agree so heartily I am going to raise Captain Nello's monthly stipend, but the point is less easily digested. Since when has a white man thought of marrying a nigger wench, particularly on the high seas? I couldn't count the nigger wenches his father codded, and half the mulattoes on the hacienda are products of his groin! He never even remembered what they looked like in the dawn!'

Softly, Dutch Rudolph pursed his lips. 'But he married a woman of color, did he not?'

'No. No, Dutch! Jacob didn't marry anybody. He merely stood like a docile bear while I married him to Elena King! His son now drinks too much and spends hours each day mewling over the wench. Oh, this is not the problem. I know how to deal with obnoxious niggers! But two flecks on the horizon are troublesome.'

'Zo?' the banker prodded.

'Yes! Like all women of color, Elena, his stepmother is beginning to develop what I believe to be a most unhealthy sympathy

for Silas. Do you understand?"

It was then Dutch Rudolph's turn to look pained. Alvarez was sure that forty years in Cuba had taught the Hollander what the sympathy of an older, partially colored woman meant to a young white man who discriminated in conduct entirely according to opportunity. 'Silas' second idea may in some way nullify the first situation, but in itself, it harbors nothing but trouble of unpredictable nature. He now plans to sail for New Orleans, which he says, is the hub of American slavery and therefore needs the sincere concerns of an abolitionist!"

"Ezz not possible!" Rudolph growled in shock.

"Is possible. Further, he talks of his impending campaign in the singular - he intends to leave his nigger wench at the hacienda! May I be forgiven if I speculate that this is a bit too much for an old man to tolerate?"

Rudolph let his fat head turn owl-like on his stubby neck.

"There is wine?" he demanded of his rightfully worried friend.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

How he had managed to survive fifteen days of the hacienda, without consciously experiencing even one partial day in a state of euphoria Silas did not know. It had seemed that no matter how much he had drunk, nor how boisteriously he had played with Belle, his mood was uniformly sour and unpleasant. Eventually, he was forced to conclude that he could never live comfortably in an aura of slavery. Every way he turned, everything he did was shadowed by a black servant, and every black servant was a slave in no uncertain terms.

On the sixteenth day, he caught her.

Don Alvarez was occupied in Havana. Belle had taken a carriage to the fitters to see about her latest wardrobe additions. When he mounted the central stairs to visit his room for some unimportant matter, Elena was standing on the landing from which the second floor *passillos* extended toward the rear of the huge house.

As was her custom at eleven in the morning, Elena was meticulously garbed and precisely groomed. Her long black hair was

spun up in a Spanish bun and pierced by three ivory needles in front of a jeweled comb. Her gown was close fitting and high necked in the best Victorian tradition. Her beringed fingers toyed idly with the ruffles across her bodice.

He thought the moment was right, and as much her doing as his. She seemed to be going nowhere, neither up nor down and her straight back was to the chambers and anterooms of the second story. He was painfully sober but he quickly succumbed to a male fever that had been lurking in his being for many days. He moved to her and boldly placed one hand around the pout of her left breast.

'Oh,' she murmured. 'Now, Silas!'

'Beautiful,' he said, his hot breath harsh on her face. 'I have been wanting the feel of it ever since I came back from Africa! We had not much time in Boston, had we?'

She made no attempt to evade his grasp but she did glance around them to be sure there were no servants to witness his caress. Encouraged by her acquiescence, he put his other hand to the other breast and moved closer, until the backs of his hands were against his shirt. He hadn't realized she was so short; he felt grotesquely huge towering over her and the difference in their heights was like an aphrodisiac.

'It is not very secluded here,' she murmured. 'Oh, Silas, be cautious - and gentle, I beg of you!'

He chuckled and let his hands slide around her slimness. For a brief moment, he was content with the feel of her against his chest and plank flat belly, then the lust he had controlled for two weeks demanded more than a flighty embrace. He turned her and pushed her down the corridor, keeping pace with her progress on long firmly stepping legs. He had no thought as to where they could go, but they reached the door to his bedchamber before they neared the doors to her apartment.

'Oh, Silas!' she husked again, but her pretended astonishment was not enough to give her the will to resist. Inside his room, he closed the door and shot the bolt with more enthusiasm than was required. Elena, like some country maiden freshly brought from the fields stood with her back half to him, her face tilted down demurely. Impatience, urged by masculinity and youth, caused him to step forward.

Theirs was not a new relationship but it lacked the glee and familiarity of a second encounter. No thought of their family relationship slowed Silas. She was nearly twice his age so there could be no hint of romance. His hands going around her

shoulders to the line of small pearl buttons down the front of her dress were purely male, adept and dedicated to the process of removing her clothes. He didn't even hear the small whimpers of emotion that escaped her smooth throat. His own breath was too harsh in his lungs, and the blood had begun to pound loudly in his ears. As her dress opened and sagged from her perfectly molded shoulders, he became more insistent with her undergarments, nearly became rough in his haste to bare her slim body to his feverish eyes.

During the awkward moment when she stood naked except for her hose and shoes and he was required to undress himself, he buffeted her with unkind eyes. Her breasts, not quite as high and firm as they had once been, promised much and the triangle of pure black hair over her delicately veined abdomen was abruptly familiar.

It became devastatingly familiar when she sank down on his bed and spread her tapered legs for his half frantic approach.

Presently, he left her to pour himself a heavy rum from the decanter on the buffet. Elena lay in a sensuous sprawl, her body half covered by a lately retrieved sheet. Her head was turned away, a placid profile through the slightly whorled glass at his lips. One hand held lightly to the sheet turnback. He was confident that he had coddled her with a fervor like she had never known before, else why was she so softly lifeless and content? He quivered nakedly, recalling moments and sensations and urgencies.

'I knew I had remembered. From Boston,' he said. Elena did not reply and he felt the necessity of saying more. 'I am sorry we are family. We are quite good - for each other!'

'Don't talk about it,' she murmured without turning her head. 'You say foolish boy things that make me uncomfortable.'

'Uncomfortable?' he asked querulously.

'Go away, Silas. Let me alone.'

'Now, wait, Elena,' he protested, shocked by her seeming unfriendliness. 'You were waiting for me, remember?'

Her head turned on the pillow and her eyes met his. There was no expression on her lovely face. 'Perhaps I was, Silas. I am not sure. I think now it doesn't matter, does it? Do you mind if I suddenly feel maternal instead of - provocative?'

He refilled his glass. 'I am not sure I understand.'

'No, you wouldn't, of course. To you, I was just a handsome bitch, inspired by a desire for your - masculinity. But if I admit that derogatory condition, and I also admit that you are more

than an adequate lover, I am bound to extend my honesty, I think. Silas, a half of me loves you dearly. Another half of me hates you with an even more violent passion!"

The tone of her voice, not her words, inspired him to pull his trousers from their heap on the floor, and when he was half clad he lost some of his first feeling of disadvantage. He did not sit down nor seek relaxation except what he found in the warming rum. Privately, he considered the debilitated woman on the bed as nothing more than a woman, pretty, luscious to his lust, but now in a feminine mood of feminine resentment for his obvious superiority and noninvolvement. He chuckled and she turned away again.

'Laugh,' she said. 'Your father would laugh if it were he. You are so like him, Silas, that I had moments of confusion while - we loved! I think I hated him more than it should be possible to hate another human being! Havana says he was a great man. Faugh! What could his wife care about ships and gold and the successful transport of a half thousand slaves from Africa? He was not a man, not real, until he entered this *casa* and turned his eyes toward me! Later, I think he found out that I am not a white woman at all!'

Silas let his eyes narrow, a swallow half completed. 'What did you say?' he demanded in a growl.

She didn't look at him. 'You know it too,' she said. 'Alvarez knew, and I'm sure no secrets existed between them. Yes, Silas, I am part Negro, an octoroon, it is called,' She fell silent as giving him time to digest her monumental confession. 'I don't think it matters because you are a nigger lover, just like your father! Belle proves it, even if she hadn't shared some secrets with me about your conquests from Boston to Freetown! Have you ever made love to a white woman, Silas?'

The razor sharp cutlass lay wrapped in the bottom drawer of the buffet and he thought about it. He was in his own house on his own property. He was King, of King-Alvarez, a political and economic power in Cuba, a demi-god in the marts of Havana, even if the acumen was Alvarez'. From his boyhood came memories of how his hated father had killed in this house and survived all legal entanglements. He started to move before second thoughts stilled him physically.

Elena had been his stepmother, Señora Jacob King de Sandini for nearly ten years. She looked white and had kept up the façade of widowship, honorable widowship, for nearly the same span of

time. The shadow on his life had been his father, who by legend, had been a man of no self-evasion, brutal, conquering and ruthless. To believe that this gargoyle had not known Elena was partially Negro during the near year they had been husband and wife, in fact and in law, was inconceivable. When he looked back at Elena, she was raised to one elbow, her naked shoulders twisted, her left breast, a rawly provocative bulb of gleaming flesh hung slightly over the out-bulge of its right facsimile. Both bore scarlet tracks of his teeth and fingers. Aware now, he thought he could see certain characteristics of her flesh and form that were negroid, the texture of the big dark aureoles around her nipples and the tint of her flesh at the armpits. He felt no personal guilt for possessing these comparative standards.

He wondered why he had been so momentarily furious and he refuted each answer before it was completely stated in his mind. He was a King by accident and instead of incensing him, it should please him that the King family had, in the face of Cuba, Havana and the eyes of the world, taken a Negro woman to its autocratic bosom. He decided to be pleased at his father's folly. It was difficult, but he compared Elena's language, manners and deportment with Belle's and the least vicious thing he could decide was that Elena King was a lady, a perfect example of what a Negro woman could become were she given a chance. He forgave her the interlude they had just shared in the name of near necessity; she was beautiful, not old, and manless and he was hardly an ogre nor was he offensive. He walked around the four poster and stood at the side of the bed upon which she lay. He felt very tall and straight, and she was soft and, he thought, expectant. His hand went out and down to cradle the right half of her face, stilling the owl-like turn of her head.

'You couldn't kill me - either, could you?' she asked.

He chuckled and his palm became more intimate on her face.

Her right hand came up to slide along his thigh until it found what she obviously sought and her left threw back the flimsy sheet to bare the lascivious slouch of her torso and legs.

It was Elena who remembered that Belle would return from the seamstress. Silas lay with his fingers laced under his head, his lean youth reduced to limpness by relaxation and temporary exhaustion. Elena stood naked before the dresser mirror, a picture of animated exquisiteness as she groomed her hair with his French military brushes. The angle was wrong for him to admire the front of her so he contented himself with a profile view of the

impudent bobble of her bare buttocks.

He didn't know what to think so he settled for immediate things. Gradually, however, her hands seemed to brush his mentality into shape as they turned her long black locks into shining order. He was sure it wouldn't work out with any degree of comfort for either of them. Once outside his door, she was again, Señora King, widow of the most successful slaver in Havana. She was rich and therefore, influential, and she was supported in social elegance by her name, her money and her relationship to King-Alvarez.

Ecstasy had not dulled his thinking enough to forsake the responsibility of his convictions. If he excused the slave factory on the Bensanee and the Victorian confusion of Freetown, he was in no position to excuse himself from further effort. He thought boldly that what he proposed to do in Louisiana would have more meaning and more emphasis since Elena had not drastically proved what he had long known to be a fact. Even now, he could hardly believe she was part Negro; she seemed to be a perfectly composed white woman, recovering effortlessly from a liaison in which she had been an equal partner. Now she put the brushes down and turned to retrieve her clothes.

The fact that she wore a silk handkerchief, tucked intimately to absorb his ample dispensations escaped him as neither professional nor practised. She was even more beautiful in her corset and underbodice, her movements fastening the garment stirred him.

'When do you sail for New Orleans?' she asked him without preamble.

It surprised him because he had discussed the vague plan only with Alvarez. It flattered him because her query meant that she had taken seriously his casually worded proposal to the Spaniard.

'I had planned it for Monday. Or perhaps Tuesday,' he replied. 'Will you miss me, Elena?'

Doing feminine, straightening things, she seemed not to have heard his counter question. Then she said, 'That was not the reason for - this.'

'This - was like a holy inscription on a holy wall!'

Her smile was nearly a smirk. 'Privately, dear Silas, I had been thinking about it - about you, for a long time!'

'As had I,' he confessed. 'Will you miss me, my dear?'

She had only to remark the affirmative to please him. Instead, she shook her head. 'No. Many years ago I closed my mind and my emotions, to the possibility that a single man could ever

penetrate my defenses again. I have never loved a man with my heart, certainly not your father! I was his wife, as I am your stepmother but these were titles, not dedications! Can you understand, Silas?"

He smiled. "Yes. Underneath, you are a nigger wench!"

She straightened up, not smiling but not apparently angry. "Tomorrow would be a better day, Silas," she said softly.

"For me to leave Cuba?"

"I will take care of Belle," she said as if it were a promise. "It is obvious to us all - Alvarez, myself, even Belle, that your rightful place is on the ramparts facing the enemy, slavery! You proved that here - only a few minutes ago!"

"With you?"

She laughed merrily and moved to the door leading out of his chambers. "Silas, I am not even sure you knew what woman you were coddling! I suspect you would have been as pleased had I been any one of the slave wenches from the quarters!" She laughed again. "A few of whom are your stepsisters!"

"Mind your tongue," he snapped, suddenly angry. But she had whirled out onto the corridor tiles after the briefest glimpse to be sure she was not seen by a chance passerby.

He frowned and stirred restlessly, strangely exhilarated by her suggestion that he depart Cuba on the morrow. There would be time to pack what he would need before *cena*. By rumor, it was a two day voyage to New Orleans, perhaps less on the *Grenita*. He thought another vessel would be more satisfactory; captain and crew would be strangers and there would be no need for explanations or evasiveness.

Silas slid out of bed and stood naked and wavering while his brain righted itself so he could look at the wardrobes and chests containing his clothes. Enthusiasms returned and he began to make plans, based upon his meagre knowledge of America. To seal them into his consciousness, he poured himself a glass of rum and drank it with manly decisiveness. Of course she had been right. Tomorrow was by far a better day for him to begin. He would go alone, stalwart on the deck of a trade schooner bound for the corrupt shores of America.

He had not the slightest awareness that he was running away again, because his awareness barely suspected that Elena was dangerous to him, Silas King, half of King-Alvarez.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Better or worse to Maelina Corrobel fluctuated on a daily basis. She was twenty-eight or nine, she didn't count very well, and she had been a 'picky whore' as long as she could remember. She didn't think about this because in all her life, whoring had been the only way she had to make a dollar. She had known two white men in her life, and one of them, the youngest and handsomest and kindest one, lay asleep on the rumpled, sagging bed at her back.

She knew of him as Silas, Si for short, and in the month they had been together, she had discovered a few other facts. He seemed to have money and an unwillingness to count it. Like this morning. She had taken twenty American dollars from the pocket of his dirty, unwashed trousers, leaving fifty there. He would not wonder about the twenty, and if he did, a glass of cheap whiskey would dull his memory to the point of laughter and merriment.

Silas laughed a lot and Maelina did too. Sometimes she did not understand what he was laughing about, but he always seemed to appreciate the simple things that elicited her mirth. They drank together, quarreled sometimes, and spent hours tussling on the bed, with grunting fornication as punctuation marks along the way. This occurred in the mornings, and at midday because Maelina worked Jackson Avenue from six until early morning.

Being a 'picky whore' she had not the protection nor the assistance of a madame. The black girls who crowded the 'houses' made less money, but they didn't have to work so hard to make it.

Friday and Saturday and Sunday were good days for Maelina. The leveemen and stevedores got paid on Friday night or Saturday night and even the lower class creoles looked for a woman. The creoles went uptown to the brothels where creole and a few French girls sang siren songs and offered the best they had for a dollar. Maelina ignored them as nonprofitable impossibilities. Her 'clients' came from the thousands of Negroes who did most of the manual labor in N'awlins, who mixed their sweat and their semen and paid Maelina fifty cents to absorb both, behind rows of cotton bales or between warehouses, or any other place Maelina understood to be acceptable. She knew of many places and in a good week she made as much as ten dollars, fully three times as much as

the most affluent 'trick' she had. Maelina Corrobel was not unhappy although she felt her life was one of endless misery.

Now she turned and looked at her white man. He slept in a restless sprawl, one that had developed after his bellyful of whiskey had cooled down. He needed a shave and his long, untrimmed hair was ratty. His face was bloated and he slept with his patrician mouth half open. He looked little different than he had seemed when she had plumped wearily into bed at his side at four-thirty in the morning. It was now eleven-twenty of the same morning.

It was a gray day in New Orleans because the summer rains were on, turning the blue sky to piles and rolls of scudding clouds that threatened more rain at any moment. The room was musky with lack of sufficient windows. There was hardly any furniture except the old bed and an older table. In one corner, a broken two burner gas stove bore a battered coffee pot and a pot of stew. A sloping shelf supported a bedraggled curtain behind which Maelina's wench elegant working dress hung in company with the two grotesquely expensive suits that belonged to Silas. A corner stand was cluttered with periodicals and papers, the latter covered with scribbles, half English and half Spanish made by Silas during some of his sober moments.

Maelina Corrobel was a free Negro largely because she had run away from the Georgia plantation when she was twelve. She was still free because her first brush with New Orleans law had ended when the constable in charge of the whore tank in the Canal Street station had discovered the handsome little colored girl had been dripping with gonorrheal discharge. The sleezy gaol medico had made her douche with potassium permanganate, gave her an unlabeled bottle of the black-red medicine against future therapy and pushed her back out on the street in company with another half dozen infected girls. Eventually, the gonorrhea had worn itself out and Maelina had advanced upon the world wiser about afflictions and the law.

He was stirring and she thought he would awaken soon. She would have stew and bread and a slice of cheese for breakfast, with maybe a spoonful or two of cold grits. He would start with a glass of whiskey, required to make his tongue and lower jaw work properly in speech. Maelina poured the whiskey in preparation, then struck a huge phosphor to light the gas burner.

She was a fluid woman, constructed bounteously at hip and breast. She dealt in protuberances without knowing the word existed. Her thick head wool stuck out around her lemon shaped skull in a veritable thatch. Her breasts were large and deceptively

solid, thrusting from her ribcage like misshapen melons. Her waist was moderate which emphasized the high outpush of her full buttocks, and at the end of ricket crooked legs, her feet were large and wide with ethnic heel bulbs that were pink and slick and very hard. No one had ever called her 'fancy' but as Jackson Steet whores ran, Maelina made her own way while many others were reduced to begging or lascivious propositions to offset their ugliness.

The flowered *bata* she wore was cheap and garish, and it was forced to hang on her shape as best it could, bulged at breast and bottom in sensual display of her bignesses there. It had once been ripped from hem to waist and sewn together with a crooked seam boasting irregular gathers. It was her favorite 'housegown' because Silas liked her in it and the robe could be shed in a split second. The stew now was bubbling but she let it simmer to gain whatever slight strength still remained in the tough meat and limp vegetables. Silas was still sleeping.

He awakened painfully. The eon between oblivion and consciousness was always long and beset with problems. He needed a trip to the slops bucket in the half-walled closet; he needed a drink to lubricate his mouth and start the saliva oozing. He hated the light coming through the rotted curtains, despite its grayness. Then his eyes focused and the first thing he saw was Jerome's cutlass, lying on the table, the once shining blade corroded with cheap cheese sprinkled with bread crumbs from the half-dry loaf beside the pie of cut Camembert. His eyes passed over Maelina, fiddling at the gas stove, as if she were not there.

His groin seemed unduly heavy and the only thing that could quench the burning in his belly was whiskey. He raised one arm, indifferent to its thin pastiness, hand outspread for the glass he knew she would hand to him. She did, and he drank deeply.

'*Que hora?*' he asked in Spanish, then smirked. 'Time's it?' he mumbled in English.

'Most noon,' Maelina said.

He could only guess how empty or how full the whiskey jug was. There was no need to guess how full his bladder was and the raw liquor had not reduced its urgency. 'Pot,' he grunted.

She crossed the small room and opened the sagging door to the slops closet. She returned, carrying the lidded oaken bucket by its rusty bale. The eyes holding the bale to the moist oak were corroded through. As she set the bucket on the left side of the bed, its contents sloshed, some from her urine, some from the weak

solution of chlorinated water used to amalgamate unpleasant odors. She held Silas' glass of whiskey while he rolled over onto one hip.

He urinated but not as copiously as he had thought he must. What he emitted was accompanied by raw agony, causing his bearded face to draw in a grotesque mask of pain. Stunned with hurt, he stared down at himself in amazement but nothing alarmed him. The burning continued, localized, then seemed to pervade his entire masculinity.

Male-like, he milked himself because it seemed the action indicated by the invisible wound. It relieved the tautness but the two small drops of flaming yellow pus that exuded from his efforts started tumults of hysteria in his drink addled brain.

'La puta puerco!' he gasped. 'Why, you filthy, black assed whore! You have set me up!'

The French attitude toward slavery being less possessive than either the English or the American brought freed slaves into New Orleans by the thousands, to melt into the horde of known slaves and create urban segments of their own. Where Avis Street intersected Charles Avenue the area was solidly black. The wrought iron gates once enclosing the block square compounds were mostly gone, stolen by inhabitants to gain a few coppers from the iron mongers who dealt in tons of scroll work for the balconies, stairways and patios of New Orleans.

Kruger's Square had once been quite pretentious, in the days when it had been occupied by whites and the only Negroes were slaves of the high middle-class merchants. When the white man gave away to the enticements of superior districts, the Negroes had moved behind them with desperation and poverty as their basic elements. Simone Kruger's own house had been turned into a bistro, with old French architecture, Spanish sympathies and Negro customers. Simone Aguilar was not getting rich because he had peculiar political bents, but he knew his trade because he was half Negro due to a Cuban father who was one generation out of the African jungle. Simone liked to think of himself as a Spaniard, and to hold up this façade, he furnished largesse to any black or white who disclaimed loudly about the unfairness of the French. Despite the Treaty of 1763, which allotted all the land west of the Mississippi River to the Spanish Crown, the French had clung tenaciously to their interest in Louisiana and particularly New Orleans.

Simone's cantina flourished in an atmosphere of surreptitious

intrigue, filth, noise and the raucous wheedling of four black prostitutes. Few white men visited the cantina, so Simone had seen Silas within seconds of his first visit. What Simone had guessed would be a short-lived association turned into a long term visitation. Day after day, Silas sat at one of the battered tables, listening to this political dissenter or that, drinking heavily, muttering to himself, and finally, falling forward in drunken slumber. He was a good customer. He paid for his drinks with silver dollars and never protested when one of the black whores rifled his pockets. He asked for nothing but more whiskey and never interfered with political dissidents, right or wrong. In the end, he always fell forward on his thin arms and went soundly to sleep.

Captain Emanuel Nello saw Silas at once. There was no mistaking the fouled remnants of the Boston suit, no hesitation about identifying the dirty ruffled shirt, nor the fine Spanish features under the tousled hair and five days of black beard. One or two of the customers in Simone's place turned to look at the tall naval man in the spotless uniform, but he was forbidding. Even the four black whores who would have approached a swamp grizzly hung back warily.

'*Aquí, señor medico,*' Nello said to the squat man behind. 'He is here, Doctor Merriweather. There!'

Abruptly, the front of Simone's small place was crowded with disturbingly alien men. There were three white sailors, a portly physician, a slim male nurse of dark visage, and the tall, grim-faced commander of the strange unit. They closed in around his one white customer as if he were a flower amid bees. Then Simone paled as much as was possible as the naval officer walked resolutely toward the counter which served as a bar.

'Who is the owner of this foul segment of hell?' Nello demanded. 'I am Captain Nello, of the brig, *Grenita*, of Havana.'

'What are you doin't with him?' Simone asked, aware that he was being robbed of dollars if the five men managed to move Silas.

'We are taking him home, my man,' Nello announced. 'You see, I may be the master of the *Grenita*, but he is the owner! I would ask some questions, if you are the proprietor of this bistro.'

'It is my place,' Simone admitted cautiously.

'How long has Mr. King, *el señor*, been attending your hospitality?'

'Ever' day for mebbe a week. Comes in, like today, at mebbe eleven or so, drinks, pays cash, and lies here until his woman picks him up, three, four in the mornin'. Why?'

'Does he eat here?'

'E-ah,' Simone replied with a Cuban spread of his brown hands.

'He owes nothing?'

Simone frowned and blinked. 'Ten dollars, mebbe.'

Nello had no American dollars so he tossed two Spanish doubloons onto the splintered counter top. Simone seized them greedily, bit them, laboriously read the Spanish embossing and plunked them into his shirt pocket where a friendly clink bespoke the presence of other coins. '*Gracias, señor,*' he said in lame Spanish.

About to pursue the matter of lingual possibility, Nello was turned by strident sounds from the table where Silas had been. He saw a seaman, a boatswain's mate, strike the upraised cutlass from Silas' apparently nerveless hand. The male nurse and another seaman were struggling to get Silas erect and under control. Cries and curses mingled with squeakily pompous shouts of, '— God . . . the rights of man . . . my destiny here . . . foul creatures,' and other meaningless phrases. Silas seemed to be frothing at the lips, a mixture of rage and cheap whiskey and madness.

Doctor John Merriweather stood by with a draught of laudanum in a small physicians' vial. The few denizens of Simone's cantina began to cluster loosely around the violent drama. None offered Silas assistance past muttered invective aimed at his apparent assailants.

Captain Nello moved gingerly through the semicircle of Negroes trying not to touch any with the whiteness of his uniform. When he got to the table, Silas was physically subdued although he still spat curses and revilements, in Spanish now, because the words and commands from his attackers were in Spanish. The table overturned from a sudden kick of Silas' left leg. The half empty bottle of whiskey clanked to the floor but did not break. A slow stream of blackish fluid ran from the bottle neck.

'How is he, Doctor Merriweather?' Nello asked the concerned old doctor.

'He is in shock, whiskey poisoning, I'd guess. He seems very thin and emaciated, captain. I doubt that he is able to walk well, even to our *volante*.'

'Get him to the carriage,' Nello said to his men. 'See that he is not injured — and be cautious of nail scratches or bites!'

Merriweather, returning the laudanum to the vial snugged into a pocket of his tool case, turned and nodded to the men holding Silas. He had quieted some, exhausted by the brief struggle. Then the doctor turned to Captain Nello.

'His diseases are not contagious under many circumstances.'

None, I think, that are apparent here!"

Captain Emanuel Nello nodded but did not smile. "I respect your opinion, sir, but with a man like Silas King, one takes few chances! My concern is to get him back to the Hacienda del King in one piece, and thusly complete my commitment to Señor Alvarez!"

He watched his men and the male nurse hustle Silas toward the curtained front portico of the cantina. He stepped forward to follow, aloof from the curious spectators, indifferent to the stink of sour brew and spilled whiskey and superior in every way to the incredible poverty of the cantina. His second step was heralded by a significant clatter. He looked down.

For a moment, he was tempted to leave the cutlass lie. Then a small chink in his memory made him look again, and he swooped down to pick up the once deadly weapon. He caught it under his left armpit, illogically uncaring that the stained blade might soil his spotless master's coat. In fact, he hoped that the perspiration generated under New Orleans' unmerciful sun might in some way, restore the blade to the glory its first master held for it.

IN EPILOGUE:

The elderly gentleman was lean and straight and precisely groomed from the puffs of his gray shotted hair to the tips of his Spanish boots. When the landou stopped, he depressed the latch of the carriage door and waved away the sprightly footman from the rear perch. Without help, he had some difficulty climbing out of the carriage to the sun-blistered ground. He left the carriage door open and walked through the screen of foliage that collared the bald knoll like a monk's habit. His boots raised small clouds of red dust as he made his way to the stone crypt, accompanied to the right by a flowerless mound boasting at one end a bleached alabaster stone bearing the simple message, 'Jerome'.

At the crypt, Don Alvarez del Prado crossed himself, then removed his coat. This he spread on the flat stone top of the tomb and sat upon it, facing the inscribed head of the imposing rectangle. He sat for a minute or two, his eyes watery as he thought a long way back into his sixty years. Finally, he sighed.

'It has been a long time, I know, *amigo*,' he said in soft English. 'But I thought of you often, of the many times you had nursed me through the same kind of fever that held me a prisoner in bed. I came as quickly as I could, knowing how you depend upon me for word of wonders or catastrophe. I never want to bring you catastrophe, and yet I have little choice this day!

'Silas is home, and recovering nicely, I think, from the disease of mind his boyish convictions had inflicted upon him. His physical self is nearly well. I have had him under the care of the finest medicos in Havana! With only a moderate degree of optimism, I believe we may see the day when your son is lithe and strong again. The catastrophe lies in fact that we do not know, nor never did, how his mind will turn when we have him physically among us once more! Only the sweet Virgin may know what lies ahead.

'Here I must apologize for my lack of knowledge. Jacob, I grow old, and with age, succumb to the many failures the good God has reserved for those who have lived their life. I nearly did not survive this last struggle with the fever, and I fear that the next will be the last. I have no regrets, except that with me gone,

Silas will be alone, a condition I promised you would never exist. The lie was mine, spoken at a time when I was a man and the world was as soft as a woman's breast. I beg your forgiveness, Jacob!

Alvarez hesitated, but he seemed not through with his mystic message. Despite the sun, he did not perspire because fever had dehydrated his lean frame. His eyes watered in the autumn wind from the south and he was too deeply buried in sentiment to mind whether the tears were righteously his or those generated by the breeze he faced.

'More another day, *amigo*, for I am old and weak. Enough to acquaint you with my vanities, the conditions I hold as precious to our friendship,' His voice wavered and hoarsened. 'King-Alvarez is rich, past the follies of any man into whom God breathed life. Elena has returned to Havana, to harass her father and stand succor to the wench Silas left with us. All things over which I have control go well for us, *amigo*, and on this note, I beg your forgiveness for my inability to help your son. Perhaps, after I have joined you, we will discover powers not allotted to the living.

'I must go now, *amigo*, because I weary. Lie in peace and know that my last breath will be spent in our behalf.'

He slipped from the crypt and quivered as he resumed his coat. He took a step, then turned to the other grave, his eyes finding the rusted hilt of a Spanish cutlass half buried in the rock hard ground. Alvarez smiled wistfully, then sighed again.

To what ten years of death had left of Jerome he said, 'Walky good, hear?' Then he made his difficult way back to the carriage, very sure he done the very best he could.